LOVING AND FORGIVING WHEN LIFE HURTS

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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JANUARY 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My love and gratitude go to those whose
love, prayers, mentoring, editing, and encouragement
helped bring this thesis-project to completion:
my husband Bill Simons,
my parents Mary and Aldon Annis,
my mentor Rev. Dr. David Currie,
my spiritual directors, Rev. Dr. Susan Currie and Dr. Margaret Wheeler,
my editor Meredith Conrow,
my Bible study and prayer groups,
and most of all,
the holy Triune God, who is the source of all power, goodness, and wisdom.
I could not have accomplished this without all of you.
To God be the glory!

My love also goes to those whose words and actions inspired this thesis-project.

"Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.
Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High;
for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."
Luke 6:35-36 NRSV

ABSTRACT

This thesis-project contains the process, procedures, and lesson handouts used in an eight-week Bible study for formerly abused or incarcerated participants, made in the image of God. It focuses on the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, calling upon believers to love and forgive themselves and others just as God loves and forgives. God forgives in order to redeem and transform believers, giving new peace and hope. Jesus also teaches how to establish safe, healthy boundaries with those who hurt others.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts

As a volunteer spiritual director and Bible study teacher at a Christian residential home for women in transition from prison or abusive home situations, the most challenging question I've seen women face is how to heal and forgive relationship conflicts within safe boundaries, especially with children, parents, and authorities. The theme I am addressing in my thesis-project is "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts." When someone causes pain or grief to come into your life, I believe that God's love can comfort and heal, and that God's forgiveness can reconcile and give hope to the souls of the faithful. The goal of my thesis-project is to encourage participants to know and love themselves as God knows and loves them, and to love God and others as Jesus Christ has loved us. I include contemporary stories of people who have experienced God's healing power after being hurt, such as the Rev. Anthony B. Thompson whose wife was killed by a domestic terrorist on June 17, 2015 in a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC.

When someone causes pain or grief to come into our lives, our pain affects our relationship with God, with ourselves, and with the one who hurt us. It may also affect our basic needs for love, guidance, and belonging:

1. the need to be loved, affirmed, and accepted by significant others
2. the need for authority figures to guide and direct us appropriately through life
3. the need to belong to a group, attached by birth or adoption[1]

1. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 97.

Our need to be loved, affirmed, and accepted can only be met completely by God, who created us, who loves us as a holy father and mother would love their child, and who promises eternal life to those who repent and turn to God in faith. God's *agape* love is described by William Barclay as "unconquerable benevolence. It means that no matter what people may do to us by way of insult or injury or humiliation, we will never seek anything else but their highest good."[2] God's holy love, which never ends, transforms the lives of those who experience it. His unconquerable benevolence has the power to comfort us, to heal us, and to bring us into the joy and peace of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our need for guidance from authority figures can best be met by the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, who loves us and gave himself on the cross to save us. At the residential home where I volunteer, all the women made a commitment to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior before arriving. In my experience, the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) have given the best guidance for dealing with pain and grief. Jesus understands our pain because he participated in our earthly lives and experienced all the temptations we experience. He was rejected, betrayed, mocked, tortured, humiliated, and killed – not because *he* sinned but because he took our sins upon himself. He atoned for all *our* sins to redeem us and give us a new life free of the dark clouds of fear, guilt, and shame that block the light of God.

Our need to belong to a loving and truthful group is generously provided for by the church formed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) and by God's community of faithful believers

2. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 50. Regarding the spiritual gift of love in Galatians 5:22.

throughout history. Small prayer groups and Bible studies have been an important part of God's healing work in my life. The community of faith encourages us to seek God's justice, to be freed from the effects of trauma, and to embrace God's commission to live out the grace and truth of God on earth as it is in heaven. At the residential home where I volunteer, the women attend church together and participate in Bible studies and other spiritual formation programs.

When we are secure in our relationship with the Triune God—the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—God invites us to become a co-lover of the world, participating in God's loving care for others and sharing the wisdom we have received to give hope to others suffering as we have. After enough loving care, we may receive the gift of grace to forgive others who have hurt us, trusting in God ultimately to provide justice. As abuse survivor Elaine Heath explains, forgiveness does not require excusing the offender, pretending that the offense didn't matter, or allowing the abuse to continue:

> To forgive is to keep bringing to God in prayer both the offense and the offender, the sin and its consequences. It is a decision to let God work out full vindication for us and full, final justice for the one who sinned. This doesn't mean that we stop seeking justice for ourselves and others who are wronged…. Forgiveness is about giving God the "right" to our vindication, God who wants to vindicate us and wants to make all things new. Unlike our desire for violent retribution, God's justice bears seeds of restoration, making a way for redemption possible for all.[3]

Studying the teachings of Jesus will help participants to experience God's love, to understand how God forgives and redeems his enemies, and to believe that God's grace, truth and forgiveness can empower them to take action in their own painful situations.[4] My thesis-project

3. Elaine A. Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 157.

4. Because God exists as three persons with one essence, as taught in classical Christian theology, and because God desires to be in relationship with human persons, I will use a personal pronoun to refer to God when appropriate. The Bible always uses the personal pronoun "he" for God while affirming that both men and women

will lay a foundation for forgiveness, but I will not expect to heal deep spiritual wounds completely in an eight-week group study, especially in those who were deceived and sinned against when they were children. During the study, I will not expect or ask participants to reconcile with those who have violently abused them; I will pray that God may guide them to reconciliation if and when the right time comes, when they are both ready.

When someone causes pain or grief to come into your life, God has the power to heal the hurts in your life, to free you from guilt, shame, and the traumas of the past, and to give you the gift of grace to reconcile broken relationships. As you live into the grace, truth, and inner peace of God's kingdom, you reflect God's light to the world around you.

Ministry Setting for the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Study

My ministry settings have included serving as the chaplain in a 28-bed inpatient hospice, serving as the chaplain in three retirement communities for senior citizens, and serving as the pastor of worship congregations within the retirement communities. I also volunteer as the leader of several home Bible studies. As I get to know people, they tell me their concerns and ask me to pray for them. Their foremost concerns are personal conflicts or broken relationships with family or authorities. The title of my thesis-project summarizes these concerns: "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts." My study especially focuses on the spiritual needs of those who have experienced abuse and broken relationships.

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were created in the image of God (Gen 1:27), and while using both male and female images of God, such as, "You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut 32:18, NIV). Therefore, I also use the personal pronoun "he" for God while affirming the Bible's teaching that both men and women were created in the image of God and that the Bible uses both male and female images of God.

"Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Related to Spiritual Formation

In one instance when I was serving as chaplain in an affluent retirement community, a woman asked me to pray that God would help her to be reconciled to her angry grandson who had not spoken to her for months. She had financial security, many friends, and all the necessities of life in abundance, but this broken relationship with her grandson was more significant to her than anything else.

Now I am volunteering at a residential aftercare program for abused women and children from the community and women returning from prison. One ex-prisoner asked me to pray that she would be reconciled to her son and daughter who were angry about the chaos she caused. She had a prison record, employment problems, and health problems, but these broken relationships with her son and daughter were more significant to her than anything else. Another ex-prisoner asked me to pray that her son would allow her to see her grandchildren, for she had never been allowed to meet them. Another woman wanted to be reconciled with her mother, who refused to speak to her. The most frequent requests I hear are for prayer to reconcile and heal broken relationships with family members.

Other frequent prayer requests concern conflicts with authorities, which sometimes cause people to lose their jobs or living arrangements. Those who have unresolved conflicts with parents or childhood authorities find it difficult to successfully handle new conflicts. Those who have been abused sometimes have trouble managing criticism from employers or other authorities. Some of the women find it difficult to discuss their problems honestly because in the past their abusers used knowledge of their victims' personal weaknesses to instill guilt, shame, and compliance, or to blackmail or manipulate them. If a person dwells on past conflicts

and hurts, it is difficult to move forward with hope for a better future. Some women have accepted negative labels that have been put on them, and they lack the confidence to change for a better life. Some are full of bitterness and resentment from years of unresolved conflicts. A few women sadly give up hope and return to the abusive situations they escaped from.

In this thesis-project, I draw on my experiences in ministering to people whose greatest expressed need is healing conflicts and painful, broken relationships, beginning with their relationship with God. Often, they find it hard to truly accept God's healing grace and forgiveness for themselves. Emotional and spiritual intimacy is difficult for those with deep shame, insecurity, or inability to trust. Their spiritual and emotional wounds affect their health, their social relationships, their home life, and their employment, especially when they self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. They need the healing grace and truth of God.

Other Spiritual Formation Issues in This Setting

Several other considerations arise in my ministry setting. In the residential program for abused women and children, the women have all professed faith in Jesus Christ before they are admitted to living in the home. While there, they participate in an 18-month comprehensive program of daily spiritual care, counseling, and biblical teaching. They are required to participate in my Bible study as well as other spiritual aspects of the program, including attending church together several times a week.

Most of the women experienced trauma while growing up. Some lacked food, clothing, shelter, dependable parents, or stability. Some women were physically and sexually attacked, even by family members or those who violated positions of trust and authority. Some were

systematically demoralized by curses, vicious criticism, and rejection of their worthiness to be accepted and loved. Even those who now appear to be happy and successful sometimes struggle with powerful negative thoughts and emotions.

Sooner or later, life hurts for all of us, in different ways. We all face challenges as we seek to find jobs, marriage partners, and stable family homes. We may face failing health, disabilities, violence, loneliness, poverty, and the death of loved ones. We are all in need of healing and reconciliation, and I believe that God's grace and truth shown in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, revealed by the indwelling Holy Spirit, is the most powerful and reliable source of this healing.

Opportunities for Growing in Spiritual Formation Individually

Although my own life has been relatively safe and secure, my most painful and disruptive problems have been related to broken relationships with important people, sometimes affecting my health and my work. During childhood I faced difficulties adjusting to frequent moves as my father advanced in his engineering career. Although our family was secure and stable, I was lonely inside. After each move to a new state, I felt more like an outsider at school. Later, I faced difficulties recovering from the loss of my only child and two episodes of cancer and chemotherapy at age 26 and age 47. I found spiritual help with my marriage conflicts, but I am still praying and trying to heal my broken relationship with one important person.

The most effective help I found was knowing God through prayer, reading through the whole Bible, worshiping with my husband, spiritual direction, and Bible study groups. From C. S.

Lewis, I learned to pray the Lord's Prayer each morning and evening, "festooning" it by interweaving my own praises and petitions after each phrase.[5] Because knowing God has been healing and life-giving for me, I find joy in sharing with others the grace, truth, love, and inner peace that God has given me. I am confident that sharing God's holy wisdom is the most helpful gift I can give to another hurting person.

Opportunities for Growing in Spiritual Formation in My Ministry Community

After many people came to me with prayer requests to heal broken relationships, I searched for scriptures that speak directly to the experiences of people who have been hurt, and I prepared a Bible study on "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts." A family asked me to teach this in their home, and they experienced improved family relationships. My Sunday school class also asked me to teach the study. People gave me valuable feedback from their own experiences with loving and forgiving, such as one woman's prayer, "Lord, please bless them and change me." A minister encouraged me to add contemporary personal stories of people who experienced spiritual healing and then witnessed to other hurting people about God's grace, truth, and inner peace. Most of all, the Gordon-Conwell Doctor of Ministry classes, relationships, field trips, and readings provided valuable knowledge and wisdom to shape my thesis-project and my ministry.

5. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 24.

My Thesis on "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts"

My thesis is that praying together in a small group, studying and meditating on the life and teachings of Jesus about loving and forgiving, and encouraging each other to share God's love with others will lead to experiencing God's spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. The principles I am using for my thesis-project are from the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. In my own struggle to overcome hurt, the radical and realistic teaching of Jesus to love our enemies helped the most: "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil" (Luke 6:35).[6] When I show the same mercy to the "ungrateful and the evil" that God has shown to me, I am a witness to God's power to heal and redeem. Those who hurt me may be encouraged to seek the mercy of God. Rather than only being a victim, I am participating in God's mission: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10 KJV).

Nabeel Qureshi describes the powerful healing effect of discovering the Beatitudes in his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. In his studies comparing Christianity to Islam, Qureshi gradually came to realize that Christianity was true. However, the thought of devastating his beloved Muslim parents by leaving their cherished Muslim faith was too painful to consider. Seeking guidance, he looked through the pages of his

6. All scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible unless otherwise indicated. Also, following the ESV and KJV, I use lower-case pronouns when referring to the Triune God.

Quran for comfort, but he found only an unapproachable Allah and "a book of laws."[7] Then he opened his Bible to the New Testament, the book of Matthew:

> Within minutes, I found these words: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The words were like a current sent through my dead heart, electrifying it once more. This was what I was looking for. It was as if God had written these words in the Bible two thousand years prior specifically with me in mind.
>
> It was almost too incredible to believe. To a man who had seen the world only through Muslim eyes, the message was overwhelming. I am blessed for mourning? Why? How? I am imperfect. I do not perform to His standard. Why would He bless me? And for mourning, no less. Why?
>
> I continued reading fervently. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Not 'blessed are the righteous' but 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'? I hunger and thirst for righteousness, I do, but I can never attain it. God will bless me anyway? Who is this God who loves me so much, even in my failures?
>
> Tears flowed from my eyes once more, but now they were tears of joy. I knew that what I held in my hands was life itself. This was truly God's word, and it was as if I was meeting Him for the first time.[8]

After reading NabeeI Qureshi's story of encountering the holy presence of God through reading the Beatitudes, I chose these scriptures for the outline of my Bible study.

Comparison of My Assumptions with Classic Historical Spiritual Journals

My first assumption is that the Bible study should begin with a brief time of praying and inviting each person to share their experiences in order to draw people into the group. As Benedict taught in his Rule, "Pray first before doing anything worthwhile. Then persist and never falter in prayer…. Prayer is the mightiest weapon and sincere kindness the strongest

7. Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 275.

8. Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, 275.

strategy" in forming a community of faith for the service of the Lord.[9] Thérèse of Lisieux wrote, "For me, prayer is an upward leap of the heart, an untroubled glance towards heaven, a cry of gratitude and love which I utter from the depths of sorrow as well as from the heights of joy."[10] Each meeting will begin with prayer. Then I will invite each person to briefly share from journaling, prayer, or spiritual experiences in the previous week.

My second assumption is that listening to a meditative Taizé chant will quiet the mind, open the heart, and invite participants to transition into meditative scripture reading. I chose the Taizé chants because they are based on relevant scriptures and because Brother Roger's purpose in forming the ecumenical monastic community in Taizé, France was to provide safety and the love of God to those fleeing the hurts and conflicts of World War II:

> Never stand still: advance with your brothers, race towards the goal in the steps of Christ. His path is a way of light – "*I am*," but also, "*you are the light of the world"* (John 8:12 and Matt 5:14). In order for the light of Christ to permeate you, it is not enough to gaze on it as though you were purely spirit: you need to commit yourself resolutely, body and soul, to that path. Be a sign for others of brotherly love and of joy…. Love the disadvantaged, all those who experience human injustice and are thirsting for justice. Jesus had a particular concern for them…. Love your neighbor, whatever his or her religious or political outlook.[11]

Each class meeting will listen to a Taizé chant after the time of prayer.

My third assumption is that the best guide to loving and forgiving when life hurts is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is our holy, Triune God, transcendent and immanent and incarnate in the universe. The class lessons begin with Genesis

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9. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Man of Blessing: A Life of Saint Benedict*, 2nd ed. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017), 88, 85.

10. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, trans. John Beevers (New York: Image Books, 2001), 139.

11. Brother Roger, *The Rule of Taizé in French and English* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013), 9-13.

1, establishing that men and women were created in the image of God. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ show us how to live as our creator intended, as salt and light in the world. Jesus combined a life of prayer to the Father with a life of compassion and justice for his neighbors.

My fourth assumption is that using the *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "Divine Reading") prayer form will effectively enable the group to read the scripture, meditate on the scripture, and pray in response to the scripture. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the word of God is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12b). In the 6th Century, Saint Benedict documented and taught this traditional way of listening to God's living word: "A listening that is one with doing. The wisdom of hearing Holy Scripture and loving in a community is the foundation of Benedict's ministry."[12] Each listener memorized as much of the holy scriptures as possible, "internalizing their verses deep into his very marrow by quietly repeating them over and over…until he was led into prayer."[13] *Lectio Divina* is intended to lead to an increased closeness and response to the living Triune God.

John Calvin also wrote of meditation on scripture in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, saying that scripture must be read with the help of the Holy Spirit:

> The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.[14]

12. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 51.

13. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 10-11.

14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.4.

Although Puritans such as Richard Baxter in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed these traditions of meditation on scripture into a full-fledged art, many evangelical Protestants were first introduced to *Lectio Divina* by Richard Foster in his 1978 book *Celebration of Discipline*.[15] Simon Chan rightly observes that if people are not aware that the practice of meditation on scripture has a long history in Jewish, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions, they may fear that *Lectio Divina* is a recent innovation based on Hindu or Buddhist practices and so become alienated from their own history.[16] I hypothesize that the traditional Christian practice of meditating on scripture using *Lectio Divina* can effectively bring both the mind and the heart under the healing influence of the Holy Spirit of God.

My fifth assumption is that ending each lesson with a blessing prayer from scripture will bring God's grace and truth into our relationships. The first lesson's blessing prayer is from God:

> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." (Num 6:22-27)

I will encourage participants to pray the scripture prayers of blessing for themselves and their loved ones each day. As God blesses us, we reflect his holy light by blessing others.

I will also encourage participants to pray a blessing prayer each day for a person who hurt them. I believe these prayers will begin to bring freedom from the hurt, within God's safe boundaries. This practice follows the teaching of Jesus Christ: "I say to you who hear, love your

15. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 167-68.

16. Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 168.

enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28). In her "Little Way," Saint Thérèse of Lisieux felt Jesus guiding her to love and bless "imperfect souls" in her convent who were annoying, critical, and had no friends.[17] "Love, for her, was indistinguishable from her enormous desire to 'win souls' and 'save sinners.'"[18]

> In Thérèse's upbringing, sinners were perceived not in terms of wickedness, but of forlornness and despair. Indeed, it was understood that despair—failure to experience God's love—can be the motive for sin as much as its result. Sinners are essentially outcasts, yearning to be received again at the table of life, but despairing at the likelihood, and their despair holds them in more serious thrall than whatever sins they might have committed in the first place.[19]

In my lesson handouts I will include stories of others who followed the teaching of Jesus to bless those who hurt them, as a witness to God's redeeming grace, truth, and justice.

My sixth assumption is that each participant will learn more effectively by keeping a journal, which includes answering ten questions each week about the scriptures and readings for the week. These reflections will lead participants into a deeper understanding of the readings, and their answers will be discussed at the next meeting. Journaling is rooted in all the Biblical writings witnessing to the presence of God, such as the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters. Some classical spiritual journals that have encouraged me include John Cassian's *Conferences of the Desert Fathers*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography *The Story of a*

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17. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 143.

18. Carol Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 213.

19. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 213.

Soul. Like the stones that Jacob, Samuel, Joshua, and others erected to honor and remember God's help, journaling preserves memories of blessings, protections, and answered prayers that we want to remember and pass on.

My seventh assumption is that the final step of moving on after being hurt begins when believers have a new purpose in life to look forward to with faith and hope. The Beatitudes begin with the realities of mourning and poverty, but they are followed by the teaching that God can enable us to be "salt" and "light" to others who are hurting (Matt 5:13-14). We will grow stronger as we participate with God in the ministry of reconciliation, using the wisdom we gained from our painful experiences to help others. Many people in the Bible, such as Paul of Tarsus, blessed others in this way, helping to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux overcame her aversion to an annoying person she lived with by looking for "Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul."[20] Thérèse blessed those who were difficult to get along with, and she prayed for the salvation of criminals and souls lost in spiritual darkness. Her forgiving nature inspired many others to trust God's will and follow her "Little Way" of blessing others. God helped many others, such as Corrie ten Boom, to overcome traumatic hurt and to be "salt" and "light" to others who were hurting. I include some of their stories in my study handouts.

Methodology for the Thesis-Project

For my D.Min. thesis-project, I developed a "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Bible study on God's effective way to heal relationships. The study includes eight 90-minute sessions,

20. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 128.

meeting weekly or during a retreat. The focus is on principles from Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, and Luke 6:17-49, the Sermon on the Plain, illustrated by contemporary personal stories of forgiveness. Participants read and meditate on scriptures about trusting in God, accepting God's love and forgiveness, loving and forgiving oneself, and healing broken relationships within healthy boundaries. The final lesson speaks of using one's experiences to help others find hope and healing in teachings of Jesus that bring reconciliation. I include stories of people who have overcome tragedy and have inspired others to find hope and healing in the grace and truth of God.

From my experience, I believe these are the most important aspects of the small group:

1. Creating a safe place by demonstrating both the grace and truth of God.
2. Asking the right questions, such as, "How is it with your soul?" (John Wesley)
3. Leaving open space to listen to the Holy Spirit illuminating the word of God.

In contrast to secular self-help books, I focus on the hope and healing that comes from living in harmony with the Triune God and with God's spiritual principles, such as the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Peer support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous have demonstrated the effectiveness of seeking support from God within a community committed to spiritual principles of grace, truth, health, and healing, rather than through individual self-help and willpower alone.

To include and welcome the widest range of people, my teaching is grounded in scripture and supplemented with personal stories of people loving, forgiving, and being healed. My chaplaincy experiences with ecumenical, interfaith, and multi-cultural groups have shown that the God who created all men and women in his image, as revealed in the Bible and the life of Jesus, is the most inclusive and unifying foundation, rather than denominational writings or

catechisms. Participants are welcome to use their preferred scripture translations. I will give participants a pre-test at the beginning of the class and an identical post-test at the end of the class to test my thesis that meeting in a small Bible study group to pray, sing a worship song, and meditate on scriptures and stories about loving and forgiving will lead to a closer relationship with the Triune God, and God will begin to heal the hurts from painful relationships.

Spiritual and Social Dynamics of My Overall Setting

The anticipated participants in my study are those who have suffered pain or grief in their lives. While popular culture emphasizes the legal rights of victims, Jesus Christ can not only bring justice but also bring grace, truth, mercy, and healing to those who are hurting.

> But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:35-38)

Jesus's counter-cultural teaching to "love your enemies" carries a healing power beyond the abilities of our legal system. His teaching has been effectively used to bring about far-reaching social changes by leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Corrie ten Boom, Brother Roger of Taizé, and Nelson Mandela.

I believe that bringing this rarely emphasized teaching to those who have been hurt may help them to see a new possibility for emotional release and spiritual cleansing from any bitterness and resentment that is increasing and prolonging their suffering. However, I will not

ask or expect participants to reconcile with those who have violently abused them. Deep wounds are seldom completely healed in an eight-week group study. God will heal those who have been severely hurt, in God's good time. I am aware that a discussion of sin and the "love your enemies" texts could trigger a strong emotional response, especially in those who were deceived and sinned against when they were children. I will be prepared to receive this response compassionately and possibly to refer someone for individual counseling according to appropriate professional ethical practices.

I will also move beyond our society's "victim" emphasis by helping participants to see themselves as called by God to use the love and wisdom they have gained from going through painful experiences to bring healing light and salt to others who are hurting. As the Scottish theologian James Torrance put it, "Jesus Christ did not come only to save us from our sins, but supremely to bring to fulfillment the Trinitarian purposes of grace in creation. We should find the fulfillment of our humanity in a life of community in the kingdom of God—our true being-in-communion with God and one another, sharing in God's love for the world as 'co-lovers.'"[21] My hope is that participants will grow stronger as they participate as a "co-lover" with God to reach out to those who are suffering in spiritual darkness.

In the next chapter I will describe the most important biblical and theological principles for addressing the spiritual and practical needs of those who have been abused or have broken relationships with family or authorities. These principles are foundational for the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurt" thesis-project Bible study.

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21. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 73. On the preceding page (72), Torrance quotes the word "co-lovers" from John Duns Scotus, one of the most influential philosopher-theologians of the High Middle Ages.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

> If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to cut out a piece of his own heart?
>
> —Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Soviet political prisoner, historian, *The Gulag Archipelago*

> God gave me the grace and power I needed.
>
> —Corrie ten Boom, concentration camp survivor and evangelist, *Tramp for the Lord*

Introduction

In meeting with people as a pastor, spiritual director, and friend, I often ask, "What can I be praying for you now?" The most frequent prayer requests have been concerns over a conflict with an authority figure or a loved one who refuses to communicate. The most painful conflicts have been a broken relationship with God and an inability to forgive oneself for poor choices. Chapter two works through biblical and theological principles that are foundational to the thesis-project Bible study on "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts."

Often our worst enemies are those who separate us from a loving relationship with God, our neighbors, and our loved ones. An enemy is "one that is antagonistic to another; especially: one seeking to injure, overthrow, or confound an opponent."[1] Once a relationship has been broken, worldly wisdom finds it difficult to heal the anger, wounded pride, guilt, and shame.

1. "Enemy," *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster Inc., accessed January 23, 2020, updated January 20, 2020, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enemy.

God sets the example for Christians by loving his enemies to bring about reconciliation. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). Like a good shepherd, God seeks out his lost children to bring us back home: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us…. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:8, 10). As 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” God teaches us to love and forgive our enemies just as God loves and forgives us.

The Bible also teaches that forgiveness is not the same as justice. God promises justice and judgment for those who abuse others and refuse to repent and turn to God for forgiveness: “For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants…. I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me” (Deut 32:36a, 41b). Christians can count on God’s ultimate justice, as Paul advised the Romans: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom 12:17-19). God has more wisdom and knowledge of the facts than people do, and God reserves the right to pronounce judgment. Although it is difficult to trust God instead of taking vengeance ourselves, Miroslav Volf wisely advises, “Without entrusting oneself to the God who judges justly, it will hardly be possible to follow the crucified Messiah and refuse to retaliate when abused. The certainty of God’s just judgment at the end of history is the presupposition for the renunciation of violence

in the middle of it."[2] God teaches us to be as patient with ourselves and others as he is with us. Nonetheless, while Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies, he also taught us to establish necessary boundaries and limits to protect ourselves from further abuse. These boundaries will be discussed in a later part of this chapter.

Christians can trust that Christ's death on the cross offered atonement for the sins of all those who repent and ask for forgiveness in the name of Jesus. As Miroslav Volf says, "At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in.... It is the consequence of God's desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion."[3] However, those who finally reject God's offer of reconciliation and forgiveness will be judged with justice (Rev 20). To those who believe that everyone will be saved, Volf says,

> We should not, however, shy away from the unpleasant and deeply tragic *possibility* that there *might* be human beings, created in the image of God, who, through the practice of evil, have immunized themselves from all attempts at their redemption. Ensnared by the chaos of violence which generates its own legitimizing "reason" and "goodness," they have become untouchable for the lure of God's truth and goodness. This is where God's anger [over injustice] comes in.[4]

Trusting in God's just judgments, Christians who have been loved and reconciled to God can likewise love their enemies. James encourages this Christ-like love: "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude

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2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*: *A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 302, emphasis in original.

3. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 126.

4. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 297.

of sins" (Jas 5:19-20). Christians can trust God to provide grace, forgiveness, and justice at the right time.

General Spiritual Theology

Holy Relationship of God: Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit

The one holy God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — transcendent, incarnate, and immanent in creation — sets the example for holy, loving relationships. God the Son modeled a close relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, showing his disciples an earthly life without sin, centered on prayer. Jesus said he did nothing on his own "but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). On the night he was arrested, Jesus prayed to his Father that his disciples would share in their love: "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:23). Jesus taught his disciples to pursue a close relationship with God and to live in harmony with God's will.

The Holy Spirit is part of this intimate relationship. "When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become, in Irenaeus's beautiful image, the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace."[5] While Jesus prayed after his baptism, "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:22). Howard Marshall says, "The OT promise that God would put the Spirit upon his Servant is fulfilled (Isaiah 42:1);

5. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

the Spirit rests upon the Branch (Isaiah 11:2)."[6] R. T. France comments on this extraordinary threefold relationship: "The human leader of the disciple group has become the rightful object of their worship. And the fact that the three divine persons are spoken of as having a single 'name' is a significant pointer toward the trinitarian doctrine of three persons in one God."[7] The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working powerfully in perfect harmony, call us to participate with God in his holy mission.

Jesus said he would ask God to give the Holy Spirit to those who loved him and kept his commandments, "even the Spirit of truth...for he dwells with you and will be in you.... He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:17a, 26). As Jesus promised, on the day of Pentecost his disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit and were transformed into courageous and eloquent witnesses (Acts 2:4). "About three thousand souls" accepted Peter's call to repent and be baptized as followers of Jesus (Acts 2:41-43). Thus, the apostolic church was adopted into the close relationship of the Trinity.

Jesus also referred to the Triune God in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20a). The church was created by God, followed the example and teachings of Jesus, and was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The church followed Christ's commandments to love one another (John 13:34-35) and to make disciples of all nations. Keener points out, "Jesus is more than a

6. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 154.

7. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1118.

normal rabbi (28:19) and summons us to make disciples for him alone and not for ourselves (23:8-10)."[8] God's relationships of grace and truth within the Trinity and within the church are our model for healthy, holy relationships.

Reconciliation in Jesus Christ

Although God created human beings to live in harmony within God's loving family, we still become enemies of God, ourselves, and others. After Adam and Eve were tempted, sinned, and hid from God, God told Satan that a redeemer would defeat him: "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15b). God sent Jesus Christ to save and redeem us:

> [The Father] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.... In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:13-20)

Paul encourages Christians to reconcile also: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). Reconciliation is: "1. the act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement; 2. the process of finding a way to make two different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time."[9] Human beings are both rebellious sinners and beloved children of God—two different facts that are true at the same time. However, in Jesus Christ, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and

8. Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 399, emphasis in original.

9. "Reconciliation," *The Merriam-Webster.com* Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Inc., accessed January 23, 2020, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconciliation. Note that this paper is not using *reconciliation* in the specific context of the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance.

peace have kissed each other" (Ps 85:10 KJV). In the Trinity grace and truth exist in perfect balance, enabling God to love and transform his rebellious children.

Sometimes God's children are rebellious because their human parents were abusive, cold, or absent, and they assume that God is like their parents. People who have not experienced true human love find it difficult to comprehend that God's character includes the redeeming love of a good father and mother, the integrity of a covenant-maker keeping his promises, the agency of a good shepherd seeking a lost sheep, and the holy mercy of a God who is beyond our complete imagining. Like a good parent, God created us and gave us life and he loves us. Like a covenant promise-keeper, God is trustworthy and dependable to the end of time; he will never leave us. Like a good shepherd, God actively seeks out the lost, heals the injured and sick, and provides food and water for his flock. Like a merciful king, God is kind and generous to those who most need his care and protection. God's unique power, goodness, and wisdom is revealed most fully in Bible history and in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Unlike human tyrants, God uses his power to nurture and bless his creation. In the world to come, as Volf says, "the Lamb's rule is legitimized not by the 'sword' but by its 'wounds'; the goal of its rule is not to subject but to make people 'reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 22:5)."[10] God took the initiative to justify us: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24). Only God's grace enables us to be in a right relationship with God. Jesus teaches us to extend this same grace to ourselves, our family, our neighbors, our church, and even our enemies.

10. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 301.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

The sacrament of Baptism is a symbol that our lives belong to the Triune God, who created us, who gave his life on the cross to save us, and who guides us. At Pentecost, those who came to faith asked, "What shall we do?" and the apostle Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38). When believers choose to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they choose to enter into a covenant relationship with God and his church.

As Jesus celebrated his last Passover with his disciples, he told them to remember when they took the bread that he was giving his body for them. He told them to remember when they took the wine that he was giving them a new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:19-20). According to Marshall, "The narrative describes how Jesus linked his self-giving with the bread, thus giving a parallel with the pouring out of his blood. This takes place for the benefit of the persons present ('you') rather than the 'many' in general."[11] As Paul explained this sacrament, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16). As Miroslav Volf says, "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in—even our

11. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 801.

enemies."[12] As members of the body of Christ, we participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation to the whole world.

Because these sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbols of God's reconciliation with us, God desires that we also be reconciled before we participate in worship: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt 5:23-24). Keener notes that while just anger must be expressed productively, "When dealing with those closest to us, such as a spouse, we must humble ourselves and seek the other person's best interests in love."[13] God takes the initiative to be reconciled even with "the ungrateful and the evil" (Luke 6:35), before they repent and turn to him. The Holy Spirit helps believers to follow God's example.

Prayer

When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he taught them the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13). The Lord's Prayer includes principles for every daily need, including forgiving our enemies and delivering us from evil. "The first half of the prayer is concerned with God's honor, kingdom, and purpose, and only after that do our own needs find a place.... The petitions are in effect a doxology, an act of worship, associating the praying community with God's purpose in the world."[14] The Lord's Prayer begins by establishing a family relationship;

12. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 129.

13. Keener, *Matthew*, 115.

14. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

God, our holy father, created mankind in his own image, male and female (Gen 1:27-28). All persons are made in the image of God and are beloved children of God, including ourselves, our neighbors, and even our enemies. The word "hallow" means to revere, reverence, and treat God and his name as holy.[15] Paul encouraged the Roman Christians to live in such harmony with one another as to "glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5-6). God wants us to respect his holiness by resolving conflicts with grace and truth.

When Christians ask God to "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11), we can remember that Jesus gave his body and blood both for our own salvation and for the salvation of the one with whom we may need to be reconciled. Our salvation is even more important than the daily ration of bread "essential for survival," such as the manna God provided in the wilderness.[16] Through the "living bread" of Jesus (John 6:51), God provides everything believers need each day to live in harmony with God and with each other.

Stressing the importance of forgiving our enemies, Jesus tells us to ask God to forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors (Matt 6:12). According to Keener, "It is clear that *debts* before God represent 'sins,' as they normally did both in Jewish teaching and in the Aramaic term used for both concepts."[17] God forgives believers not because we deserve his forgiveness or have earned it but because it is his character to love: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain

15. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), BibleWorks v.10, s.v. "ἁγιασθήτω."

16. Keener, *Matthew*, 143.

17. Keener, *Matthew*, 144.

his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love" (Mic 7:18). The word translated *steadfast love* is the Hebrew word חסד or *chesed*, which the *BDB Hebrew Lexicon* defines with all the richness of God's covenant love for his people:

> חסד: goodness; kindly instruction; kindness (especially as extended to the lowly, needy and miserable), mercy; lovingkindness in condescending to the needs of his creatures; lovingkindness in redemption from enemies and troubles; lovingkindness in preservation of life from death; lovingkindness in quickening of spiritual life; lovingkindness in redemption from sin; lovingkindness in keeping the covenants with Abraham, Moses, Israel, David and his dynasty; fidelity; mercy great in extent, as great as the heavens, the earth is full of it, everlasting.[18]

Jesus demonstrated this חסד or *chesed* on the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34a). For Nolland,

> The scope of the prayer reaches to all who had a hand in securing Jesus' present position upon the cross.... In the midst of this dreadful experience, Jesus remains true to his own vision: God is still his Father, and love for his enemies is still his practice, even in this extreme situation. The possibility of forgiveness is a central part of the Lukan understanding of the gospel, and in Acts, the element of ignorance will be stressed, as forgiveness is offered to any and all, even to those responsible for the execution of Jesus (Acts 3:17; 13:27; 17:20).[19]

Marshall notes, "The motif of forgiveness for sins of ignorance, and the thought of Jesus giving a last chance to the Jews fit in with Lukan thought."[20] Paul also said, "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:13b). To forgive our enemies, we need to remember God's steadfast love for them, God's desire to redeem them from sin, and God's promise of a righteous Last Judgment. Jesus teaches us to love and forgive ourselves and our debtors with the same steadfast love God has given us.

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18. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an appendix containing Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), BibleWorks, v.10, s.v. "חסד."

19. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1146, 1148.

20. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 868.

As Christians pray "lead us not into temptation," one extreme temptation is that of seeking a self-centered, sinful life while the other extreme is that of being so sanctimoniously judgmental that we are unwilling to forgive other sinners. As Volf observes, "Obsession with the rules—not bad rules, but salutary rules!—encourages self-righteousness and the demonization of others."[21] Like some of the Pharisees, our desire to obey God scrupulously can tempt us to withhold our forgiveness from repentant sinners. In Jesus's parable of the unforgiving servant, the master said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:32-33). When believers are tempted to become judgmental and unforgiving, this parable reminds us to have mercy on ourselves and others, as God does.

The petition "deliver us from evil" asks God not only to deliver us from the evils in the world that we have no control over but also to deliver us from the evils within us that hurt both ourselves and other people. As Jesus said, "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23). Christians can ask the Holy Spirit to cast out evil desires and to replace them with the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). Jesus desires to deliver us from evil and to fill us with holy grace and truth. God has the power and authority to redeem us, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever" (Matt 6:13 KJV). Christians can ask our Triune God to forgive us, deliver us from evil, and bring about his kingdom in our lives.

21. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 162-3.

The Word of God in Scripture

Scripture is a two-edged sword that must be handled with wisdom and discernment. Believers can study the Holy Bible from three perspectives: first, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ; second, "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) throughout *all* the books of the Bible; and third, the history of the Triune God's redemptive care in the lives of all his people. A good way to understand both the grace and truth of God is to read straight through the Old and New Testaments chronologically. The historical narrative shows why the Jews longed for a Messiah and why the life and teachings of Jesus were such good news to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Jesus said it was not enough just to read and quote the Bible. He confronted hypocrites by asking, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). Nolland says, "This verse addresses itself pointedly to all who profess discipleship but settle for a less demanding way than that proposed by Jesus in his call to love of enemy and nonjudgment."[22] Jesus lived out God's teaching when he said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Those who follow Jesus, trusting God's sovereignty and power to transform us, will be empowered to forgive themselves and others.

My theological background for interpreting and obeying the Bible is a loving Protestant orthodoxy representing grace and truth in balance. I was baptized Methodist, grew up Presbyterian, and was strongly influenced by C. S. Lewis's writings, especially *Mere Christianity*. I served as a chaplain in a Roman Catholic hospice and several Protestant retirement facilities with people of many religious backgrounds. I have participated in inter-faith dialogues and

22. John Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35a (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 309.

ecumenical Bible studies as well as in Bible studies representing one denomination's doctrinal positions. I learned to focus on the core Biblical beliefs most Christians have in common about God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creator, redeemer, and sustainer of our souls—transcendent and incarnate and immanent in the universe—one holy Triune God.

The presupposition for this project is that the Bible is the most effective source for teaching the broadest range of people to love and forgive themselves and others. The apostle Peter said, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21b). The Holy Spirit makes the Bible "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword…and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). "It shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11b). While denominational Christian teachings can sometimes create cultural barriers in an ecumenical group, all Christians have the Bible in common. Many non-Christians recognize its historical and cultural importance. The Bible is the unique and authoritative witness to the sovereignty of the Triune God, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. God heals and transforms our lives through his living Word.

Biblical/Theological Foundations for "Loving Your Enemies with Grace and Truth"

Loving Your Enemies

> Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.
> —Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*

One of the most revolutionary teachings of Christianity is the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies in order to be perfect like God:

> You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48)

This mission of Jesus to redeem the world by loving his enemies was difficult for the disciples to understand and accept. When a village of Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus because he was traveling to Jerusalem, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy them (Luke 9:51-56), but "Jesus categorically rejects such a suggestion."[23] The disciples expected their Messiah to kill Israel's hostile enemies as Elijah and King David did, but Jesus had a new plan for his enemies. According to Osborne, the words "hate your enemy" do not appear as such in the OT, "but 'it was said' can be…an inference from Deuteronomy 7:2; 23:3-7; 25:17-19; Ps 139:21-22 (drive out and destroy your enemies among the nations)…. The imprecatory [cursing] psalms also encouraged this attitude."[24] For the disciples of Jesus, loving your enemies was a new idea. "Two changes are important: (1) from the singular 'enemy' to the plural 'enemies,' stressing the universal nature of the command, and (2) the use of the present imperative, stressing the ongoing need of such an attitude. This was revolutionary, and there is no evidence for such a command in Jewish literature."[25] It was hard for the disciples to understand why Jesus expected them to love their enemies when they had been brought up to avoid even eating with them.

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23. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35b (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 534.

24. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 212.

25. Osborne, *Matthew*, 212.

Jesus had a better plan in mind, a long-range plan that required patience. As Volf says, "God's patience is costly, not simply for God, but for the innocent. Waiting for the evildoers to reform means letting suffering continue."[26] Like a good shepherd, Jesus was going to seek out his lost sheep, beginning with the house of Israel. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). Jesus came to call Israel to follow the God who promised never to forsake them.

Prophecies of a New Covenant

Jeremiah had prophesied a new covenant with God's people: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people…and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:33-34). As John the Baptist prophesied, Jesus offered himself as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus gave his life on the cross to atone for the iniquity of both the covenant people of Israel and the Gentiles: "I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me" (John 10:15b-17a). As his fearful disciples struggled to comprehend this concept of a Messiah, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to dwell within them and teach them (John 14:16-26).

All these prophecies began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost:

> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues…. Peter…addressed them… "This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the

26. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 299.

> last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and… everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'… Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."… So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:4-41)

God reached out to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Although many of these lost sheep had been living in enmity with God, Jesus gave his life to save and redeem them.

God's Steadfast Love

Our relationships with our enemies are built on this foundation of God's redeeming love. Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies and "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). Our earthly desire is to hate and fear our enemies, but God's desire is to bless and redeem them. God's steadfast love (Hebrew חסד or *chesed*) is far greater than our human ability to love, for it encompasses both grace and truth (John 1:14). The Holy Spirit is able to help us love our enemies so that we may participate in God's plan to redeem the world through the new covenant in Jesus Christ: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18-19). God desires to redeem his disciples and also their enemies.

Instead of seeking "an eye for an eye" (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21; Matt 5:38), we can follow the example of Jesus and love our enemies with grace and truth. Volf warns against imitating brutality: "Though victims may not be able to prevent hate from springing to life, for their own sake they can and must refuse to give it nourishment and strive to weed it

out. If victims do not repent today, they will become perpetrators tomorrow."[27] Keener says, "Jesus is not so much revoking a standard for justice as calling his followers not to make use of it; we qualify justice with mercy because we do not need to avenge our honor. Jesus calls for this humble response of faith in God; God alone is the final arbiter of justice, and we must trust him to fulfill it."[28] God is pleased when we honor him by carrying out the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us.

God Created Us in God's Image and Blessed Us

Although we are painfully aware of the sins of those who hurt us, God created them in his own image and blessed them (Gen 1:27-28). We are all the beloved sons and daughters of God, created in God's image, and loved by our Creator "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). God takes parental responsibility for his people and has intervened throughout Biblical history to rescue us from ourselves: "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isa 43:25). God's love for us does not originate in our righteousness but in his own character of steadfast love, חסד, which always desires to help us repent, to redeem us from sin, and to quicken our spiritual life. Our hope for the salvation of our enemies lies in God's loving desire to redeem all of us and adopt us into the holy life of the Trinity if we repent and turn to him.

27. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 117.

28. Keener, *Matthew*, 127.

Loving and Forgiving Others

Because God loved us first, we can learn to love and forgive others first. When we repent and accept Christ as Lord and Savior, he asks us to become his agents in his plan to redeem the world. Through the Holy Spirit, God enables us to love others in a way that we are not able to do on our own: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19-21). Jesus expects us to give to others the same mercy that we have received, and God enables us to do so by giving us the Holy Spirit.

Loving the Enemy Within Yourself

> The person who understands the evil in his own heart is the only person who is useful, fruitful and solid in his beliefs and obedience. Others only delude themselves and thus upset families, churches and all other relationships. In their self-pride and judgment of others, they show great inconsistency.
>
> —John Owen, English Puritan minister and theologian, *Sin and Temptation*

Like many people, I am my own worst enemy. As the apostle Paul said, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do…. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body" (Rom 7:15-23a, NIV). I recognize King David's expression of remorse: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love…. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps 51:1, 3). David asked God for forgiveness and cleansing: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). In his prayer for a clean heart and a right spirit, David asked God to make it possible for him to be forgiven and to forgive himself.

When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, he answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-39). Keener says, "Jesus here assumes rather than commands self-love."[29] Only if we love ourselves in the grace and truth of God will we be able to love our neighbors with that same grace and truth. If we keep feeling judgment, guilt, and shame toward ourselves, we often project judgment, guilt, and shame onto others. If we have no hope of forgiving ourselves, we will also have no hope of forgiving our enemies.

Five influences that may make it hard for us to forgive ourselves are false prophets, spiritual forces of evil, cultural idols, ignorance of how God forgives and redeems, and fear. The biblical perspective on these adverse influences is discussed in the following sections. Because "forgiving" is a major theme in this thesis-project, these five influences that make it hard to forgive ourselves are also discussed from the perspective of biblical scholars in chapter three.

False Prophets

If we listen to false prophets who "know" that we have no hope of ever being forgiven and accepted by God, we may believe the lie that God wants to condemn us. For example, when a sinful woman anointed the feet of Jesus, a Pharisee said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:36-39). Marshall notes that "Jesus is able to read his thoughts and reply to them, and also not only is Jesus willing to accept the touch of a sinful woman, but he even

29. Keener, *Matthew*, 330.

suggests that her action is more welcome to him than that of his host."[30] Those who have difficulty forgiving themselves can trust Jesus instead of letting false prophets judge them.

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus sees us not just for what we are but also for what we can be if we let him save us:

> Then turning toward the woman [Jesus] said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven.... Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:44-50)

Those who repent and accept God's redeeming grace and truth as this woman did can ignore condemning false prophets. We can love and forgive ourselves as God loves and forgives us.

Spiritual Forces of Evil

Another reason people keep believing the lie that God wants to condemn us is that spiritual forces of evil in the world are trying to pull us down from the grace and truth of God. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). These evil forces encourage us to ignore God's holy desires and to do whatever feels good to us. When the inevitable painful consequences follow, we might accept the lie that God will never forgive us and that we deserve to keep suffering.

If believers have repented in good faith but keep thinking fearful, guilty, shaming, hopeless, and accusing thoughts against themselves, these thoughts may be coming from evil

30. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 310.

forces trying to separate them from God. Evil forces also instigate slander, false accusations, malicious jokes, deceptions, gaslighting, and jealous attacks to shame people into hiding from God and their neighbors. Therefore St. Paul advises, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph 6:10-11). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b). Jesus made a way for us to repent of our sins, to be forgiven, to forgive ourselves, to be liberated from evil influences, to find a joyful new life in Christ, and to share this hope of redemption with others.

Cultural Idols Teaching That There Is No Need for Forgiveness

Another reason we may not forgive ourselves is that we worship cultural idols, such as entertainers, sports personalities, social media influencers, media pundits, political figures, and even some religious leaders, who say that whatever we feel like doing is acceptable, and there is no need to ask for forgiveness. The apostle Paul describes this worldly opinion: “Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.… They not only do [these sins] but give approval to those who practice them” (Rom 1:28, 32). Since God created the universe and the natural laws that govern it, the natural consequences of going against God’s laws will catch up to us, followed by guilt, shame, fear, and anger. Like the prodigal son in Luke 15, we may regret our self-destructive choices and realize that we should return to God.

Cultural idols may condone sinful behavior, but only our Creator has the power to forgive and the parental love to want to forgive. Idols do not have the body and blood of Jesus

Christ to wash away our sin. Idols do not have the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable better relationships with God, our neighbors, and even our enemies. Cultural idols may encourage us to make self-destructive choices, but only God has the grace and truth to help us repent, forgive us, restore our souls, and give us eternal life.

Ignorance of How God Forgives and Redeems

When believers feel they have committed a sin so terrible that it is unforgiveable, it is difficult to forgive themselves. They may believe that they have destroyed another person's chance to have a worthwhile life. They may have no hope that people will ever accept them again. They may forget that God is not only able to redeem them but also to care for the person they have sinned against.

Believers also may fear that they have committed the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit that Jesus warned against in Matthew 12:32: "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." The unforgivable sin is a hard-hearted refusal to repent and ask forgiveness from our Triune God, for "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Keener reminds us that we humans cannot judge who has crossed the line and committed the unforgiveable sin, but we can reassure those who are needlessly anxious: "Not uncommonly young Christians read about the 'unforgivable sin' and fear they have committed it. We therefore must reiterate the point in this context: the sin is unforgivable only because it reflects a heart too hard to repent. Those who desire to repent, troubled by the fear that they may have committed this sin, plainly have

not committed it!"[31] Those who understand God's desire to forgive and redeem us through the cross of Jesus Christ may be assured that God also wants us to forgive ourselves.

Hebrews 6:4-8 also warns that for those who have been enlightened and have shared in the Holy Spirit and then have fallen away, "it is impossible…to restore them again to repentance." Judas Iscariot spent three years as a disciple of Jesus Christ and then helped the Sanhedrin arrest him to be crucified. Judas was unable to forgive himself for betraying Jesus, and he may have thought that he had destroyed any chance for Jesus to be the Messiah. Judas was not at the cross to see Jesus Christ giving his life for our sins and saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Judas did not wait to see God show his power by resurrecting Jesus. Judas did not return to the disciples to hear the resurrected Jesus forgive them for deserting him when he was arrested. Instead, Judas fell away and went off by himself. "When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' They said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself" (Matt 27:3-5). According to Keener, "Since the chief priests refuse to serve the cause of justice [for a false witness], Judas has to see to his own execution."[32] Jewish readers "would recognize Judas's act as one of despair, a dishonorable suicide."[33] Jesus said it would have been better for Judas if he had not been born (Matt 26:24). Like Judas, believers with a guilty conscience may

31. Keener, *Matthew*, 232.

32. Keener, *Matthew*, 381.

33. Keener, *Matthew*, 381.

also give up hope that God can cleanse and forgive them for their sins. They may fall away instead of repenting and appealing to Jesus for help.

Peter also betrayed Jesus Christ by denying three times that he even knew him, but Peter returned to be with the disciples instead of falling away. He repented and received forgiveness from the resurrected Jesus, who asked Peter three times to serve his new church: "Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'" (John 21:17b). Barret says, "Peter, thrice questioned by Jesus, thrice affirms his love for him, and is entrusted with the pastoral care of Christ's flock."[34] Peter believed that Jesus Christ had the authority of God to forgive sins, so Peter was able to return, to repent, to accept forgiveness from Jesus, to forgive himself, and to preach the Good News of the Gospel effectively. Believers with a guilty conscience can take heart and follow his example.

Secure in his knowledge that Jesus Christ had forgiven him and given him work to do in the church, Peter was also able to be reconciled to others. He forgave Paul for opposing him and publicly condemning him in front of the church at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). Peter called him "beloved brother" and commended Paul's letters to the church (2 Pet 3:15-18). Because Peter personally knew God's steadfast love and forgiveness, he was able to love and forgive people who opposed him.

34. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 583.

Fear

Another reason why people are unable to accept God's redeeming love and forgive themselves is that they are afraid—afraid of God, afraid of their enemies, afraid of responsibility, or afraid of what God might ask in return for forgiveness. Like Moses pleading, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (Exod 4:13), we sometimes want to hide from God because we are afraid. Throughout the Bible one of the most frequent commands God gives is, "Do not be afraid!" Jesus repeatedly told his disciples to not be afraid, such as during the great storm on the sea: "He said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm" (Matt 8:26). Jesus has the power to free us from fear because he has the power to help us to accept God's redeeming love and forgiveness, to trust in God's protection and justice, to repent and forgive ourselves, and to minister to our enemies. As the apostle John said, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18a). Those who trust that the living God is guarding their souls and their future do not need to be afraid.

Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies

Christians may have idealistic intentions to love their enemies until they are violently attacked. Then what? For every person like Daniel who was rescued by God from the lions' den (Dan 6), there were others like the apostles Peter and Paul who were killed by the enemies to whom they were witnessing. In the Torah, God established protective boundaries for men and women in relationships. Jesus also taught his followers five boundaries and limits for relationships with others: be in God's will, be confident in God's Truth, be willing to set and

enforce clear boundaries, be willing to wait, and be willing to walk away. These boundaries are especially needed for participants in the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Bible study. It is hard for many abused people to set healthy boundaries, and some participants may return to live with people who have violently abused them. The biblical and theological perspectives on these boundaries are discussed in the following sections. The perspective of biblical scholars on these five boundaries is discussed in the chapter three literature review.

Be in God's Will

First, Jesus only did what God sent him to do, so he was never operating outside of God's protection: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing'" (John 5:19a). He knew he had God's approval and backing, so Jesus was not afraid to carry out his ministry regardless of persecution. Jesus followed God's agenda instead of reacting and adjusting to the demands of his adversaries. He began each day in prayer with God and remained in prayer throughout the day. He trusted God to fulfill the plan they prayed about together as both did their part.

Jesus also did not allow his disciples to turn him away from God's agenda. When Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die and on the third day be raised, Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matt 16:23). When his disciples tried to change his plans, Jesus chose to remain in the center of God's will.

Furthermore, Jesus did not let his own fears turn him away from God's will. When he was tempted to be overwhelmed by fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, "Abba, Father,

all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Jesus had such trust in God that he followed God's will alone.

Be Confident in God's Truth

Second, Jesus sometimes overcame his enemies with truth, and they gave up fighting and walked away. When the scribes and Pharisees brought an adulteress to Jesus to test his judgment, he overcame them with truth. He said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her…. [and] they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones" (John 8:7, 9). Another time the Pharisees asked a question to test him, and again he overcame them with truth. "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (Matt 22:46). We too can confidently speak the truth in love and then trust God for the results. As Jesus advised his disciples, "When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt 10:19-20). Keener says, "God will empower the disciples by the Holy Spirit of prophecy."[35] When we are under attack, we can trust God and be confident in God's truth.

Be Willing to Set and Enforce Clear Boundaries

Third, Jesus set and enforced clear boundaries in his relationships with those who opposed and persecuted him. He did not give in or let them push him into imitating their sinful

35. Keener, *Matthew*, 207.

behavior. As Dan Allender explains, “In order to stop evil in its tracks, parameters must be set in the moment of transgression. A parameter (or boundary) is any line in human relations that honors separateness and respects individual dignity. For example, in our home a closed bedroom door should not be opened without knocking and asking for an invitation to enter.”[36] Jesus advised his disciples to avoid arguments and making promises with oaths: “Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matt 5:37). Jesus said “no” when people tried to cross his boundaries, as when they were about to come and take him by force to make him king (John 6:15). He refused to answer when Peter wanted to know the future plans Jesus had for John (John 21:21-22).

Even when he was threatened with crucifixion, Jesus kept his own dignity and did not allow others to violate the boundaries of his soul. Pilate demanded answers, saying, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (John 19:10) Jesus kept his own dignity. He said, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin" (John 19:11). As Allender writes, “We need to catch evil in the act and smile, calmly and confidently stating what we are willing and unwilling to endure—then watch hell rise out of the fury and explode.”[37] In his fury, Pilate delivered Jesus over to be crucified.

Allender says, “Our refusal to accept potential abandonment blocks most of us from setting limits and establishing consequences. But when we find the courage to do so, we will

36. Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 245.

37. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 246.

find love to be a powerful weapon against the forces of darkness."[38] Watching the awesome courage and dignity of Jesus on the cross, the Roman centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Jesus also honored the individual dignity of others, such as the penitent thief on the cross beside him. To the Roman soldiers he was just a common criminal, but Jesus looked on his soul and said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus honored God's boundaries, his own boundaries, and the individual dignity of others.

Following his example, the disciples confidently set and enforced clear boundaries. The high priest had them arrested for witnessing to Jesus in the temple, saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (Acts 5:28). Nevertheless, Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The apostles were threatened with shame and punishment, but they followed God rather than men. They honored God's boundaries.

Be Willing to Wait

Fourth, when someone we love rejects us and leaves, sometimes we must wait until he or she is ready to come back. When the prodigal son demanded his inheritance, left home, and squandered his money, his father allowed him to learn from his own mistakes (Luke 15). Although the father loved his son, he did not go after him and rescue him from his hunger and misery. He did not try to "fix" his son. The father waited until his son fully understood the

38. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 247.

consequences of his poor choices, repented, and made the choice in his own heart to change his ways and return to his father. The prodigal son came to know his father's compassion in a new way when he returned:

> While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20b-24)

Nolland says, "The return to the father is yet more important than the confession of sin, since this opens up the possibility of the father's welcome; what is more, the father's welcome precedes the confession, and even qualifies it."[39] According to Marshall, "The language certainly suggests that the son had announced his intention never to return, and that therefore he was as good as dead. His unexpected return leads to great rejoicing."[40] The son was able to make his own choice to return because the father was willing to wait.

Knowing when to wait and when to intervene for a loved one takes prayer and discernment. There is "a time to seek, and a time to lose" (Eccl 3:6). Seeking too soon may prevent a prodigal from growing to maturity. On the other hand, there is a time to seek for a lost sheep in danger. When Christians pray to discern God's leading, he helps us know how to wait until the right time.

39. Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 784.

40. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 611.

Be Able to Walk Away

Fifth, sometimes when people attacked Jesus, he simply walked away from them. When the angry mob in his hometown attempted to throw him over a cliff, "passing through their midst, he went away" (Luke 4:29). Marshall points out that "his hour had not yet come."[41] When another angry mob picked up stones to stone Jesus, "he escaped from their hands" and went away across the Jordan (John 10:22-40). If we will pray and listen, God is able to tell us when it is best to walk away.

In the same Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44), he also set limits by saying, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you" (Matt 7:6). Keener says, "Correcting those who will not receive correction is futile (vv. 1-5; Prov 9:8; 23:9); we should discerningly continue to offer wisdom (or the gift of the kingdom) only to those willing to receive what we offer, just as God does (Matt 7:7-11)."[42] God gives to those who ask and seek; he does not force people to listen who are not ready to listen. When Jesus sent his disciples out to witness, he told them to walk away if they were not welcomed: "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town" (Matt 10:14). Sometimes God may guide us to walk away and pray for our enemies instead of answering their objections.

St. Augustine's mother Monica took this approach with her violent husband Patricius. When he was in a rage, she withdrew until he had calmed down instead of arguing with him:

41. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 190.

42. Keener, *Matthew*, 159.

> Though [Patricius] was remarkably kind, he had a hot temper, but my mother knew better than to say or do anything to resist him when he was angry. If his anger was unreasonable, she used to wait until he was calm and composed and then took the opportunity of explaining what she had done. Many women, whose faces were disfigured by blows from husbands far sweeter-tempered than her own…knew well enough how hot-tempered a husband my mother had to cope with. They used to remark how surprising it was that they had never heard, or seen any marks to show, that Patricius had beaten his wife or that there had been any domestic disagreement between them, even for one day. When they asked her, as friends, to tell them the reason, she used to explain the rule which I have mentioned. Those who accepted it found it a good one: the others continued to suffer humiliation and cruelty.[43]

Monica's example of patience and gentleness made a deep impression on her son Augustine and on her husband. Augustine praised her to God in his *Confessions*: "In the end she won her husband for you [God] as a convert in the very last days of his life on earth.… Those of them who knew her praised you, honoured you, and loved you in her, for they could feel your presence in her heart and her holy conversation gave rich proof of it."[44] Monica was able to walk away, pray, and wait patiently until her husband was ready to listen. God answered her prayers and her husband accepted Christ.

Summary

Following the example and teachings of Jesus, the disciples loved their enemies within God's boundaries and limits. They devoted themselves to prayer to be in God's will. They boldly and confidently preached God's grace and truth despite persecution. They set and enforced clear boundaries when people opposed them. They were willing to wait for God's timing. They

43. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 195.

44. Augustine, *Confessions,* 196.

were able to walk away from futile arguments when they were attacked. They learned to minister in response to God's leading, within God's boundaries and limits.

The Hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

God's desire for our enemies is to change their lives for the better and reconcile their relationships. Jesus demonstrated this desire when he met Zacchaeus and went to his home even though people grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). The critics thought of Zacchaeus as the hated rich chief tax collector who would never change his ways to obey God. As Marshall notes, "To stay in such a person's home was tantamount to sharing in his sin."[45] Nolland says that Jesus, instead of following "the practice of social ostracism as a means of deterrence…practices a far more creative alternative" by loving his enemy.[46] Jesus gave him a chance to change his heart, and Zacchaeus responded, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Jesus answered, "Today salvation has come to this house…for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9-10). As Nolland points out, "Contact with Jesus has transformed Zacchaeus. Despite his manner of life up to this point, Zacchaeus is not to be disenfranchised from the People of God."[47] Even our worst enemies may be reconciled when the Lord offers them salvation. Instead of destroying Zacchaeus, Jesus redeemed him and transformed his greed into generosity for the poor.

45. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 697.

46. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 905.

47. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 906.

Jesus also redeemed Saul on the road to Damascus and gave him a new name: Paul. Jesus changed him from a man "breathing threats and murder" against the church into "a chosen instrument…to carry my [Jesus's] name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:1, 15). The Lord was able to reconcile Paul with the church, to use Paul's gifts to serve the church, and to bring about good instead of evil as Paul witnessed for God.

This holy power to save and reconcile gives us hope as we follow Christ's example in loving our enemies within God's boundaries and limits. Like a good shepherd, the Lord seeks out his lost children and desires to bring them home to be reconciled. Christians can also seek out God's lost children, especially our enemies, and seek to be a channel of holy grace and truth to them. We, too, can love people who offend us in hope that they will repent, receive the joy of the Lord, and be saved as we were. Like Jesus, we can be the first to extend love as "he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We can desire to bring glory to God and joy to the Father's heart by helping the lost to find their way home. The first twelve apostles could never have imagined how the Gospel message would spread throughout the whole world. God can also work through believers today to accomplish far more than we might ask or think (Eph 3:20).

The most significant idea presented in my thesis-project Bible study about loving enemies is that God forgives in order to redeem and transform. Instead of forgiving those who hurt us, believers may be tempted to hide from them or to seek revenge. God does not need to avoid or destroy hostile people to protect himself as people often do; Jesus demonstrated his lack of fear as he went to the cross to save us. Unlike most people, God has the power, goodness, and wisdom to redeem and transform enemies if they will repent and seek the relationship they were created to have with him. God also enables believers to forgive their

enemies in order to redeem and transform them into friends. Our Lord calls us to participate in the transformation of our enemies if we are willing to let the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit work through us to love them as God has loved us.

Chapter two has described important biblical and theological principles for addressing the spiritual and practical needs of those who have been abused or have broken relationships with family or authorities. The chapter three literature review gives the perspective of biblical scholars on these significant principles, which are foundational for the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" thesis-project Bible study.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal for my thesis-project Bible study "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" is to heal broken relationships within healthy boundaries. Chapter two describes the most important biblical and theological principles for addressing the spiritual and practical needs of those who have been abused or have broken relationships with family or authorities. Chapter three gives the perspective of biblical scholars on these significant principles. The literature reviewed in this chapter helped me to select scriptures for the Bible study, to understand the needs of those who have been abused, and to lead discussions about God's grace and truth.

Being in Relationship with God

When life hurts, the first and most important relationship that needs to be healed is our relationship with God. For Dallas Willard, being in Christian relationship with the Trinity involves organizing the six basic aspects of a human life around God: thought, feeling, choice (including spirit, will, decision, character, and heart), body, social context, and soul; the soul integrates the first five aspects to form one life.[1] "It is, above all, this spirit (or will) that must be reached, cared for, and transformed in spiritual formation" in order to bring the entire personality into a harmonious relationship with God.[2] When life hurts, those who organize their lives around the

1. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 30-31, 33, 38. Williard defines *choice* to include spirit, will, decision, character, and heart on pages 30 and 33.

2. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 34.

grace and truth of God and develop a strong capacity for choice "will be very careful about what they allow their mind to dwell upon or what they allow themselves to feel."[3] With a strong and healthy spirit, a believer's mental, emotional, physical, and social natures can be brought into harmony with the holy God who created us in his image and loves us.

For those whose bodies have been abused, learning that their thoughts, feelings, bodies, and spirits can be cleansed and restored by God can be transformative. Both men and women were created in the image of God and "those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29a). For those who feel shamed by their bodies, it is significant that Willard emphasizes that the human spirit is most central to bringing the entire personality into a harmonious relationship with God. For those who feel limited by their gender, learning that their spirits can develop the full range of character qualities modeled by Jesus, such as power, strength, courage, goodness, gentleness, nurturing, and wisdom, can bring hope and a new dimension of possibilities.

While Willard's teaching on the soul and spirit is life-giving, he is one of many who emphasize that "*Christian spiritual formation rests on this indispensable foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being firmly laid and sustained*."[4] This is right and true; however, as Willard recognizes, this "sounds like some dreadfully negative thing that aims to annihilate us."[5] He later speaks of abused and rejected children who have distorted images of themselves and feel worthless and unlovable, not knowing God's

3. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 34.

4. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 64, emphasis in original.

5. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 64.

mercy and grace for healing, regeneration, rebirth, and renewal. Unfortunately, Willard says, manipulating people by false negative self-images "is often done in the name of Christ to achieve some desired result. By contrast, to loosen the grip of fallen imagery and its underlying idea structure is a fundamental part of what mental health professionals must do to aid their patients. It is also essential to the Christian ministries of inner healing and evangelism."[6] Richard Foster asks, does being crucified with Christ mean "the death of my own will" as many spiritual guides have said? He answers, "We are dealing with the crucifixion of the will, not the obliteration of the will. Crucifixion always has resurrection tied to it. God is not destroying the will but transforming it so that over a process of time and experience we can freely will what God wills."[7] Foster's explanation is clear and hopeful. Christians must be sensitive to the wounded self-images of the abused before they explain the need for death to self.

Prayer

> There is no worse screen to block out the light of the Spirit than confidence in our own intelligence.
>
> —John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Epistles of James and Jude*

Through personal prayer experiences, the Holy Spirit of God has called many men and women into relationship with him in their times of greatest need. Martin Luther's personal prayer experiences brought him close to God; they also brought him into conflict with the religious authorities and precipitated reformation for the church. Benedict's personal

6. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 101.

7. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 54-55.

experiences with God led him to teach that each monk was to be obedient to what was best for the community, guided by the authority of the Holy Scriptures and the abbot.[8] However, in America, where independence and freedom are celebrated, many are guided solely by their personal prayer experiences and their own intelligence. As Charles Olsen and Danny Morris note, "We prefer to play games with God by saying, 'God, show me your will and if I like it, I will do it.'"[9] Eugene Peterson emphasizes, "The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God."[10] Stephen Macchia writes, "I have found that one of the greatest sins of the Christian church today is an independent spirit. 'We'll do it our way or no way, thank you very much' seems to be our attitude."[11] These independent spirits do not understand God's wisdom and his desire to help us when life hurts.

When Jesus's disciples were praying together on the day of Pentecost, God's power and wisdom brought about a powerful transformational experience: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). This experience changed the frightened little group of disciples hiding behind locked doors into a united, dynamic Body of Christ. The Triune God worked through this newly formed church to transform the Roman Empire and take the good news of the Gospel to all parts of the world. Jesus met Saul on the Damascus road "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the

8. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Man of Blessing: A Life of Saint Benedict*, 2nd ed. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), 148-149.

9. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 56.

10. Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

11. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 29, 30.

Lord" (Acts 9:1), forgave him, transformed him, and changed his name to Paul. After Paul's conversion, "he knew how to discern the movements of the Spirit, and he knew how to work in cooperation with those movements. That knowledge produced a spirit-empowered life."[12] As these apostles drew close to God in prayer, God transformed their lives and empowered them to love and forgive themselves and their neighbors.

One of the most important challenges for Bible study leaders is encouraging people to have a healthy personal experience of God. Eugene Peterson's preferred comprehensive term for the Christian life is "fear-of-the-Lord," cultivated through personal prayer and corporate worship.[13] When we are aware of the sacred Presence, "we become still, we fall silent, all our senses alert. This is the fear-of-the-Lord,… to live in reverence before God, responding with "worship, adoration, prayer, awe."[14] For Peterson, "Prayer is our way of being attentively present to God who is present to us in the Holy Spirit."[15] Christian leaders can encourage people to pray by showing reverence and respect for the holy presence of God.

Some Bible study participants do not understand the full power and authority of God. Louis Berkhof explains, "Theism has always believed in a God who is both transcendent and immanent. Deism removed God from the world, and stressed His transcendence at the expense of His immanence.… Pantheism…identified God and the world, and did not recognize a Divine

12. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 109.

13. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 39-41.

14. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 41-42.

15. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 272.

Being distinct from, and infinitely exalted above, His creation."[16] Bible history shows that God—transcendent and immanent and incarnate in the universe—knows us intimately, loves us, and has the transcendent power, goodness, and wisdom to guide and protect us when life hurts.

Bible study participants need to learn discernment when they pray. When Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380 AD) began to hear voices and have powerful visions, she feared they might not be from God:

> The Lord commended her prudence and instructed her: visions that come from God inspire fear at first, he told her, but then go on to fortify. Visions of demonic origin yield sweetness at the outset, but soon pain and nausea develop. The certain sign that a vision is from God is that it will always bear fruit in 'a greater knowledge of truth in the soul' (Life 73). The mark of one who has had this kind of vision is humility.[17]

When Catherine was tempted by demonic thoughts, she prayed, "I trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, not in myself."[18] After Jesus protected her from the evil thoughts, she was able to laugh at them and they vanished.

Foster begins his devotions by praying for protection: "By the authority of almighty God, I surround myself with the light of Christ, I cover myself with the blood of Christ, and I seal myself with the cross of Christ. All dark and evil spirits must now leave. No influence is allowed to come near to me but that it is first filtered through the light of Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen."[19] Foster quotes Thomas Merton's words on prayer: "God loves you, is present in

16. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: With a Complete Textual Index* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 24.

17. Carol Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 110.

18. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 112.

19. Foster, *Prayer*, 157.

you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons."[20] God's holy power, love, wisdom, and protection throughout the day help us to love and forgive when life hurts.

Some Bible study participants do not know that God has the power to protect them from human evil. Saint Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) asked God for protection when soldiers from an invading army climbed the wall into her convent of San Damiano. Clare lay at the door in prayer begging, "Lord, look upon these servants of yours, because I cannot protect them."[21] The men left without harming the sisters. The prayers of Clare and the sisters are also credited with saving Assisi when "the army of one Vitale d'Aversa was camped outside the city walls, sworn to level the town at daybreak unless it was handed over."[22] Clare and the sisters put ashes on their heads and prayed in the chapel, and the army left Assisi the next morning. Clare completely depended on God's care and protection, and God heard and answered her prayers.

Some Bible study participants do not know that God is able to help us when people won't listen to our needs. Saint Benedict (480-547 AD) and his sister Saint Scholastica (480-543 AD) devoted their lives to God's service and depended on God's answers to prayer for their daily bread. They met in a mountainside hut shortly before they both died. Scholastica needed Benedict to stay and talk with her one last time, but he wanted to return to his monastery as his Rule required. Scholastica wisely appealed to God in prayer. When she lifted her head, thunder cracked, lightning danced, and torrents of rain flooded the mountain passes. She said

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20. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 156, quoted in Foster, *Prayer*, 160.

21. Flinders, *Enduring Grace,* 40.

22. Flinders, *Enduring Grace,* 40.

"Brother, I wanted you to stay. You wouldn't. I needed you to hear me. You didn't. So I asked God, couldn't you stay just this once. It seems our Lord answered my prayers with a resounding, 'Yes.' Don't you think?"[23] Benedict agreed. They stayed up talking all night about God's blessings and parted in the morning with affection. Three days later, she died, and Benedict buried her with honors in his own tomb. God heard Scholastica's prayer in her time of need and helped her.

Some Bible study participants do not know that God hears and answers prayers for practical, everyday needs. Saint Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510 AD) was called to serve God at Pammetone Hospital in Genoa, Italy. She cared for the poor and sick and urged them to call on Jesus. She had a small private room in the hospital for prayer, and she had intense mystical experiences of union with God. "Between her calling as a contemplative on the one hand and a caretaker on the other, we are to understand, no real conflict ever occurred, because the voice of someone 'in genuine need' would have been the voice of Christ.… Her work and her contemplative life were one and the same."[24] In 1493 the plague struck Genoa and four-fifths of the people in town died. Catherine had a vast series of tents constructed behind the hospital and she organized medical teams to care for the sick and dying, for which the city of Genoa "holds her in abiding love and reverence."[25] Catherine's life was immersed in prayer, and her love for God flowed out in hands-on love for those who were suffering.

23. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 136.

24. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 131.

25. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 153-154.

Some Bible study participants have been taught that prayers must always follow complicated rules and scripts. Brother Lawrence (c. 1614-1691) came to God with the simple, childlike faith commended by Jesus (Mark 10:15). As a young French soldier, he was wounded and forced to retire from the army.[26] He entered a monastery in Paris as a lay brother and cook. First, he tried to follow their spiritual practices, then he focused only on doing everything for the love of God—serving his brothers, cooking, cleaning, and repairing sandals—and pausing frequently to worship God silently in his spirit for a few moments.[27] When others noticed his gentleness and joyful spirit in the midst of the noisy kitchen and asked for his spiritual advice, he explained his simple practice of the presence of God:

> I haven't followed any particular steps in my own spiritual growth…. I found methods to be discouraging.… My soul, which had always been troubled, finally came to rest in a profound inner peace.… I have given up all but my intercessory prayers to focus my attention on remaining in his holy presence. I keep my attention on God in a simple, loving way. This is my soul's secret experience of the actual, unceasing presence of God.… When I give myself to God this way, He begins sculpting my soul into the perfect image of His beloved Son.[28]

Brother Lawrence believed his soul was united with God "solely by his grace," by "salvation through the blood of Christ."[29] He respected and loved the Bible above all other books.[30] The graces of God became visible in his character, and he died peacefully at eighty years of age. His conversations and letters, recorded in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, have grown in

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26. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 76.

27. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 60.

28. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 35-38, 49.

29. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 65, 69.

30. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 88.

influence with both Roman Catholics and Protestants such as John Wesley and A. W. Tozer.[31] Many have been inspired to follow his simple practice of the presence of God.

The Word of God in Scripture

The Word of God in scripture is one of our greatest blessings. However, it may be incomprehensible to those who are suffering and angry with God. As Chris Webb says, we may fear that God is a pitiless judge who will "retreat, perhaps in disgust. As long as we allow such an image to remain festering in our souls, we will always find it difficult to experience the intimate presence of God through Scripture—or, indeed, in any other way."[32] Those abused by human parents may distrust God's fatherly and motherly love. Also, people may resist the Bible when it challenges their beliefs, their lifestyle, or their priorities. Even so, Chris Webb believes that "a life and presence has been breathed into Scripture, some power, some flash of the divine fire.... God not only speaks, he makes himself fully present—gentle as the still small whisper on the mountain, terrible as an army with banners."[33] The Bible "is a thin place through which the presence of God breaks into this world and bursts with unpredictable consequences into our lives."[34] The Bible brings good news to those who listen with open hearts.

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31. "Brother Lawrence," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed February 1, 2021, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence.

32. Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 39.

33. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 57.

34. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 31.

For those new to reading the Bible, Webb recommends four attitudes while reading scripture "as a way into presence"**:** read prayerfully, listen with no agenda, read in humility willing to obey, and read expectantly.[35] To test your own understanding and discernment, ask:

- Is this consistent with the experience of God witnessed in Scripture?
- Is it in harmony with the understanding of life before God, which the Bible describes?
- Are there any jarring discrepancies between my experience and biblical teaching?[36]

Foster recommends that a Christian "become a biblically saturated person…[and] read entire sections…in one sitting" to gain understanding.[37] Those who prayerfully read through the entire Bible can discern the loving relationship God wants to have with us in all our joy and pain.

Foster warns against perils from misinterpreting the Word: having a condemning, judgmental spirit; setting overly narrow standards of right and wrong; and failing to speak prophetically to particular political agendas.[38] "The closer the issue comes to the heart of the Christ event—Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection—the more it becomes a matter of primary importance."[39] He cautions against the mentality of "the only true church" unwilling even to associate with people of differing beliefs; the assumption that "everything between the end of the book of Acts and the nailing of Luther's ninety-five theses on the door…is doctrinally corrupt and must be rejected"; the tendency to present too limited a view of the salvation found in Jesus Christ; and the tendency toward bibliolatry, for "Christ is King and Lord of

35. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 71-77.

36. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 45.

37. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 232.

38. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 92-94, 179-180.

39. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 228.

Scripture."[40] The living and active Word of God gives us grace and truth to build healthy, loving relationships, even when life hurts.

For both leaders and those new to reading the Bible, Richard Foster defines Biblical discernment as "the divine ability to see what is actually going on and to know what needs to be done in any given situation."[41] Three Great Themes are vital: "the faithful proclamation of the gospel…rooted in the person of Jesus Christ," "the centrality of Scripture as a faithful repository of the gospel," and "the confessional witness of the early Christian community as a faithful interpretation of the gospel."[42] Meditating on the Word can bring powerful experiences of God's presence both individually and in leadership meetings. As Ruth Barton writes, "Leaders who place themselves before the Scriptures in a way that allows God to speak to them personally are more disposed to hear from God in ways that affect their decision making when they are with others."[43] The Word of God has the power to help people know God in an intimate way when they listen with an open mind and spirit, even when life hurts.

Loving Your Enemies

God's Steadfast Love

> The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good,
> but that God will make us good because He loves us.
>
> —C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

40. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 228-231.

41. Foster, *Prayer*, 231.

42. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 219.

43. Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 41.

The most important question at the root of all our fears is "God, do you really love me?" People long for a reassuring answer to this question when they are abused. Those who feel securely loved by God are better able to love themselves and others in a healthy way. Ruth Barton says we need discernment, "the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God.... It is our commitment to *discerning and doing the will of God* through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership…so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing."[44] In times of crisis and chaos, confidence that God is actively present—with power, goodness, and wisdom—transforms our relationships with loved ones, neighbors, and enemies.

God Created Us in God's Image and Blessed Us

> God loves you because of who God is, not because of anything you did or didn't do.
>
> —Regina Brett, *The Plain Dealer,* May 28, 2006

To be a perfect image of God, Jesus said, you must love your neighbors and your enemies (Matt 5:44). For Chan, "spiritual progress is viewed primarily from the perspective of restoring the image of God."[45] Peterson recommends looking for the image of God in others even during what seems like a human catastrophe, praying and trusting that "God's grace is in operation and will persist."[46] St. Catherine of Siena felt she received a special gift from God as she cared for the poor and the sick: "the gift of being able to see the beauty of each soul,

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44. Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 10-11, 20, emphasis in original.

45. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 9.

46. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 191.

whatever the exterior."[47] Margaret Guenther advises discerning the presence of God in each person by exploring, "Where is God in this person's life?… How is the Holy Spirit at work in this person's life? What is missing?"[48] The grace and truth of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can enable Christians to love and care for others also created in the image of God.

Loving and Forgiving Others

> *Agape*, the Christian word, means unconquerable benevolence. It means that, no matter what people may do to us by way of insult or injury or humiliation, we will never seek anything else but their highest good.
>
> — William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*

When others hurt us, it is hard to follow the example of Jesus and ask, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Peterson says, "I don't know of any part of the Christian gospel that is more difficult to move from the pages of sacred Scripture and our honored volumes of theology into the assumptions and practices of our everyday Christian lives."[49] He defines sin as "a refused relationship with God that spills over into a wrong relationship with others.… The only way to deal with [sin] is by forgiveness" made possible by the blood of Jesus Christ.[50] God's grace and truth can enable us to love and forgive ourselves and others, even in times of crisis, pain, and chaos.

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47. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 115.

48. Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley Pub., 1992), 43.

49. Peterson*, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places***,** 318-319.

50. Peterson*, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places***,** 316, 319.

God takes the initiative to love and forgive us first, and he enables believers to take the risk of loving and forgiving others first. In her "Little Way," Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) endeavored to please Jesus by loving difficult people: "to seek out the menial job, to welcome unjust criticism, to befriend those who annoy us, to help those who are ungrateful."[51] She also followed Paul's teaching, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). Thérèse's generous "Little Way" transformed relationships in her closely confined convent community and it can be helpful whenever people are confined together and resentful.

Stephen Macchia says the first step in building loving and caring relationships is to love others as God first loved us. "Since we have been unconditionally loved and accepted by God, forgiven, restored, and ushered into a new relationship with him, the church is to exhibit those same Christ-honoring graces…so people feel safe enough to take the second step in building loving and caring relationships: showing authenticity, transparency, honesty, and integrity."[52] Because character shortcomings cause continual, everyday disagreements, the third step in building loving and caring relationships is to "exhibit grace, mercy, forgiveness."[53] God's grace and forgiveness can help believers to love and forgive themselves and others, bringing healing and wholeness to the people of Christ.

Acceptance is vital for women and men who have been systematically degraded and demoralized. Abusers sometimes use knowledge of their victims' personal weaknesses to instill guilt, shame, and compliance. Abused women and men need time to develop trust before they

51. Foster, *Prayer*, 62.

52. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 101.

53. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 102.

feel it is safe to be authentic and transparent, especially if they have previously admitted their moral failures to abusers who used that knowledge to blackmail or manipulate them. Abused women and men need to break free of judgmental labels imposed on them. As spiritual director Margaret Guenther says, "When I label, I limit."[54] People need a trustworthy spiritual guide who is able "to spot the byzantine ploys of the ego to make itself the center of everything, even of its own suffering and struggle,… to make judgments without being judgmental, to smell a rat without allowing her ability to discern deception [to] sour her vision of the glory and joy that is everyone's birth-right in God."[55] People need someone capable of "the double task of holding up the demands of absolute responsibility and the promise of absolute forgiveness."[56] They need a spiritual leader who reflects both the truth and the grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught that forgiving is essential: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14). Foster says that those who forgive do not pretend that the offense did not really matter. They may not forget, and they may still suffer pain from deep wounds. "The offense is real, but when we forgive, the offense no longer controls our behavior.... The power of love that holds us together is greater than the power of the offense that separates us."[57] Christians learn to forgive by experiencing God's mercy and grace for their own sins and feeling the relief and freedom of being given another chance.

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54. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 19.

55. Alan Jones, "Preface," in Guenther, *Holy Listening*, xi.

56. Jones, "Preface" to *Holy Listening*, xiii.

57. Foster, *Prayer*, 188.

When believers are grateful that God has forgiven them and healed their relationship with him, they can forgive others and heal their relationships with them also, within safe boundaries.

Loving and Forgiving Yourself

> Maybe someone will say to you, "You have to forgive yourself." But that isn't possible. What is possible is to open your hands without fear, so that the One who loves you can blow your sins away.
>
> —Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*

Our own regrets, feelings, and memories can separate us from God's healing power and keep us from loving and forgiving ourselves. When we become our own worst enemies, Eugene Peterson recommends seeking a wise spiritual director who can name the temptations we struggle with and can guide our sense of God, practice of prayer, and understanding of grace.[58] Subjecting our experience to the scrutiny of another and to a trustworthy Christian community helps us become more proficient in discernment.[59] Henri Nouwen says, "What needs to be guarded is the life of the Spirit within us,… to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers."[60] Reflecting on the Word of God, praying, repenting, and meeting with a spiritual director helps believers to hear the loving and forgiving voice of God when we struggle to love and forgive ourselves.

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58. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 171.

59. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 212.

60. Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 47.

Richard Foster counsels that shame and guilt are not a cause to doubt God's love and hide from God. He says, "We should learn to pray even while we are dwelling on evil."[61] By being honest with God about our struggles, believers learn that God can quiet our souls and give us the grace to try again. When our own thoughts "continue to jostle in [our heads] like mosquitoes," Foster recommends repeating a short prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).[62] When Christians repent and pray for healing and forgiveness, Jesus Christ intercedes for us (Heb 7:25) and heals our relationship with God .

False Prophets

Some Bible study participants may find it hard to love and forgive themselves because false prophets have alienated them from God or the church and made them feel inadequate or worthless. Children are especially vulnerable to parents or authorities who crush their spirits with excessive shame and guilt. A child who experiences constant criticism with no hope of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and redemption may grow up to accept abuse from partners, church authorities, cults, or gangs. Dallas Willard sees this abusive pattern all too often in churches. He quotes one Christian-college president who asked, "Why are Christians so mean to one another so often?… You can be vilified for just the slightest move that is displeasing to someone."[63] Willard agrees:

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61. Foster, *Prayer*, 14.

62. Foster, *Prayer*, 124.

63. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 238.

> Christians are routinely taught by example and word that it is more important to be right [about church traditions] than it is to be Christlike. In fact, being right licenses you to be mean, and indeed, requires you to be mean—righteously mean, of course. You must be hard on people who are wrong, and especially if they are in positions of Christian leadership. They deserve nothing better. This is…the practice of 'condemnation engineering.'[64]

He says the result is "groups of people whose most intimate relations are tangles of reciprocal harm, coldness, and resentment…being 'Christian' without being Christlike…because they have never, to their knowledge, seen the reality of Christ in a living human being."[65] These "mean Christians" were taught to be righteous, but they were not taught to love and forgive their neighbors as Jesus Christ told us to do. Condemning false prophets like these can make it difficult to love and forgive ourselves.

Simon Chan says any criticism from a true prophet has "a moral and spiritual presupposition…matched by the morality of the prophet's own life."[66] A critic motivated by pride, envy, a desire to corrupt, or a desire to control is a false prophet. A true prophet speaks of restoration, seeks to bring unity, seeks to glorify God, and leads to "an increase in faith, hope and charity."[67] Trustworthy Bible study leaders criticize with the goal of restoration, not destruction. In abusive conflicts, Parker Palmer warns that a leader "must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him/herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership creates more harm than good."[68] The healthy social boundaries set forth in the

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64. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 238.

65. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 239.

66. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 203.

67. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 203, 205.

68. Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 43.

Bible, a wise spiritual director, and the love of a faithful Christian community will help protect vulnerable believers from being harmed by false prophets.

Even when people do face unjust criticism from false prophets, God can work it for good. Inquisition censors forbade Theresa of Avila to preach or to comment on Scripture; they thought women might disseminate heresy. However, by God's grace, "contemplative prayer had worked a miracle in Theresa's life, and she was determined to make that miracle available to others."[69] The Inquisition examined her orthodoxy by requiring her to write out detailed descriptions of her spiritual experiences. Spurred on by their demand, Theresa taught silent mental prayer to her spiritual daughters and others for twenty years through hundreds of letters and poems and four books. Four centuries after her death in 1582, Saint Teresa of Avila was proclaimed the first authorized woman Doctor of the Church in 1970.[70] God protects those who devote their lives to serving him from condemning false prophets.

Spiritual Forces of Evil

> Many have puzzled themselves about the origin of evil. I am content to observe that there is evil, and that there is a way to escape from it, and with this I begin and end.
>
> —John Newton (1725-1807), *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1824

When troubles arise for Bible study participants, spiritual forces of evil in the world may try to alienate them from saving grace by insinuating that God wants to condemn them. Chan says these powerful evil forces can only be combated through our covenant with God. "The

69. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 157.

70. Mary T. Malone, *Four Women Doctors of the Church*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 10.

ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is in Jesus Christ, whose coming is the eschaton (Heb 1:2) and whose life of perfect obedience and self-sacrifice effectively brought deliverance from the captivity of sin, both for Israel and for the rest of the world."[71] Jesus taught his disciples to repent of their sins and ask God to "deliver us from the evil one" (Matt 6:13, NIV). When spiritual forces of evil try to alienate believers from God, they can ask for all the help they need.

Although catastrophes occur in everyone's life, God created us and has a plan to save each faithful believer. As Eugene Peterson explains it, "This plan develops with two kinds of action, the battle and the journey: we must fight the forces that oppose our becoming whole; we must find our way through difficult and unfamiliar territory to our true home.… These battles and journeys are both interior (within the self) and exterior."[72] Believers do not fight alone. As Calvin writes, faith is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward the believers, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."[73] Faith in the holy Triune God gives believers courage and hope when life hurts and spiritual forces of evil threaten them.

Cultural Idols Teaching That There Is No Need for Forgiveness

Another reason Bible study participants may lie awake at night feeling guilty and unforgiven is that they are worshipping an idol who stands between them and God. This idol could even be a parent, a pastor, a spouse, a lover, a son, or a daughter. Chan quotes Dietrich

71. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 77.

72. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 120.

73. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 81-82, quoting John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7.

Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*: "There is such a thing as human absorption…wherever the superior power of one person is consciously or unconsciously misused to influence profoundly and draw into his spell another individual or a whole community."[74] In a healthy Christian community, Chan says, "Christ stands *between* the lovers; union is never direct. No matter how loving a relationship, without Christ between the persons in love, it threatens to become an idol."[75] Even the traditions and practices of the church can become idols, separate from a relationship with God. The workplace or the church may persuade us to pursue cruel or unjust actions, convinced that there is no need to repent or seek forgiveness for doing them.

Bible study leaders need to be aware that moralism can become an idol when it grows into "a way of life in which I have no need of a saving God [because] my good behavior will guarantee protection from punishment or disaster."[76] Perfectionism can also lead individuals and entire communities to "accomplish impressive projects and manage stunning achievements, but they also end up without friends, often without family, without forgiveness because they never need it, and without love."[77] Peterson warns, "We need to be wary of god-fantasies so we don't end up less human, less personal, less relational, less than who we were created to be."[78] Many Christians and entire nations have suffered painful consequences from following idols.

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74. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 110.

75. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 110.

76. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 145.

77. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 320.

78. Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God* (New York: WaterBrook, 2017), 229.

When believers are in a faithful relationship with God, his truth will show us our sin. His grace will give us confidence to confess, repent, and be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. In contrast, idols do not have the authority to forgive. They lead their followers away from God and discourage them from turning back to be forgiven and saved by grace.

Ignorance of How God Forgives and Redeems

Sometimes Bible study participants are unable to forgive themselves because they believe they have done something so terrible that God could never forgive them. They may even feel that they deserve to suffer or die because of their sin. They may not know that our Lord is able to work miracles of repentance, as he did in the lives of many Bible leaders such as King David (Ps 51). When people repent and ask for forgiveness, God wants to help them change for the better.

Bible study leaders should understand that trying to attain spiritual purity through our own self-discipline will only lead to despair. Dallas Willard warns, "Spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the self is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of a regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God. Such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by putting pressure on the will (heart, spirit) alone."[79] Participants should not be pressured into loving and forgiving before the grace of God has given them "love of God with all of the heart, soul, mind,

79. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 41-42.

and strength, and of the neighbor as oneself."[80] When we trust and cooperate with the grace and truth of God, he enables us to be forgiven and to love and forgive ourselves and others.

Chris Webb gives the example of Zaccheus, who was transformed by the presence of Jesus. "He discovered that his brokenness and depravity were no barrier to the love of God.… What has become defaced and diseased can be cleansed and healed."[81] God's power, goodness and wisdom can redirect our disordered impulses to their rightful channel. Augustine discovered that "Jesus Christ had the power to break the bonds of moral failure.… Only Christ gave the ability to live the virtuous life for which [Augustine] longed so ardently."[82] The Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—helps us to repent, ask for forgiveness, and forgive ourselves. God's redeeming power gives hope for a new life of grace, truth, love, and joy.

Fear

Those who have experienced pain and trauma in their lives are sometimes unable to accept God's redeeming love and forgiveness because they are afraid of their abusers, afraid of their memories, and afraid of God. Their fears may not seem rational, but they are powerful. Those teaching a class on "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" need to understand how prayer, pastoral care, and therapy can help to heal those who have experienced trauma.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk grew up in Holland surrounded by Holocaust survivors. He treated trauma of the human brain and body for over forty years as founder of the Trauma

80. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 31.

81. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 48, 161.

82. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 190.

Center in Brookline, MA, as professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine, and as director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network. His book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,* shares what he learned about therapeutic methods that can help traumatized people to heal and rebuild their lives.

The effects of the same trauma can vary for different people. Van der Kolk gives an example of a lovingly nurtured five-year-old child who witnessed the World Trade Center attack from his nearby schoolroom window. The boy was able to actively rescue himself by running away to a safe and secure home where his brain and body could make sense of what happened.

In contrast, when a threatened person is trapped, held down, or unable to get away to safety, their trauma is much more severe. "Traumatized people become stuck, stopped in their growth because they can't integrate new experiences into their lives.… Every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past."[83] They "often resort to using drugs, alcohol, or self-mutilation to block out their unbearable knowledge.… Most of them suffer from agonizing shame about the actions they took to survive."[84] Brain-imaging research shows that "images of past trauma activate the right hemisphere of the brain and deactivate the left."[85] Since the left brain is linguistic and analytical, deactivation of the left hemisphere disables the capacity to organize experience into logical sequences and to express our feelings and perceptions with words. "We can't identify cause and effect, grasp the long-term effects of our actions, or create

83. Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 53.

84. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 12-13.

85. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 44.

coherent plans for the future."[86] "Victims of assaults and accidents sit mute and frozen in emergency rooms.… When words fail, haunting images capture the experience and return as nightmares and flashbacks."[87] When similar sounds, smells, or physical sensations bring the trauma back into consciousness, the emotional brain often overwhelms and deactivates the rational brain.

Trauma also affects the person's bodily reactions to sound, touch, and smell. "If your sleep is disturbed or your bowels don't work, or if you always feel hungry, or if being touched makes you want to scream (as is often the case with traumatized children and adults), the entire organism is thrown into disequilibrium."[88] In response to debilitating terror, many people have learned to shut down the instinctive feelings and emotions that accompany fear. "They also deadened their capacity to feel fully alive…and many lose their sense of purpose and direction."[89] In addition, constantly elevated stress hormones cause memory and attention problems, irritability, sleep disorders, and other long-term health issues.

Van der Kolk says that the difficulty in controlling a constant overload of emotions and impulses makes it hard for people to adapt to the emotional state and intentions of others and to have harmonious relationships. "As long as the mind is defending itself against invisible assaults, our closest bonds are threatened, along with our ability to imagine, plan, play, learn,

86. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 45.

87. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 43-44.

88. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 56.

89. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 94.

and pay attention to other people's needs."[90] Triggered responses cause some people to be hypervigilant, startle easily, overreact to minor provocations, or feel devastated by small rejections, while others may shut down emotionally and become numb. Some have difficulty trusting spouses, children, co-workers, and others who did not share their traumatic experiences. Children often mistakenly assume that "terrible things were done to them because they are terrible people."[91] Being trapped or prevented from escaping danger "leads to 'learned helplessness,' a phenomenon that is critical for understanding and treating traumatized and humiliated human beings."[92]

> People no longer run when they should be trying to escape or fight back when they should be defending themselves.... Women who had an early history of abuse and neglect were seven times more likely to be raped in adulthood. Women who, as children, had witnessed their mothers being assaulted by their partners had a vastly increased chance to fall victim to domestic violence....
> Actual physical contact can trigger intense reactions.... Achieving any sort of deep intimacy—a close embrace, sleeping with a mate, and sex—requires allowing oneself to experience immobilization without fear. It is especially challenging for traumatized people to discern when they are actually safe and to be able to activate their defenses when they are in danger.[93]

Van der Kolk says that all these irrational reactions are largely outside people's control. "Shame becomes the dominant emotion and hiding the truth the central preoccupation."[94] These neurological effects on intuitive and emotional abilities make it difficult for traumatized people to adapt to groups and to carry on intimate family relationships.

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90. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 76.

91. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 134.

92. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 78.

93. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 87, citing the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE).

94. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 67.

Dr. van der Kolk found that therapists must acknowledge and teach four fundamental truths to help people effectively participate in their own healing process:

> (1) our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being;
> (2) language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning;
> (3) we have the ability to regulate our own physiology, including some of the so-called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving, and touching; and
> (4) we can change social conditions to create environments in which children and adults can feel safe and where they can thrive.[95]

While medications can calm and stabilize people, Dr. van der Kolk also wants to help restore brain structures overwhelmed by trauma. Being safely anchored in the present with a trusted and respected caregiver while revisiting the trauma "opens the possibility of deeply knowing that the terrible events belong to the past."[96] "We must, most of all, help our patients to live fully and securely in the present, [finding satisfaction] in ordinary everyday things like taking a walk, cooking a meal, or playing with your kids."[97] For many patients, trauma has shut down their sense of agency: "the feeling of being in charge of your life—knowing where you stand, knowing that you have a say in what happens to you, knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances."[98] Therapists can help people to participate in their own healing process and to have fulfilling lives and relationships.

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95. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 38.

96. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 70.

97. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 73.

98. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 97.

Therapists can also remedy a patient's extreme disconnection from bodily sensations. Van der Kolk says, "I was amazed to discover how many of my patients told me they could not feel whole areas of their bodies."[99] Since the right brain is intuitive, emotional, visual, spatial, and tactual, he recommends releasing the body's physical tensions with healing therapies that communicate through the right brain, such as group singing, dancing, rhythmic movement, massage, or body language.[100] These therapies can be more effective than left brain linguistic and analytical methods alone. Worship and small group meetings that include group singing and rhythmic movement can also communicate more holistically.

When teaching a class on "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts," giving advice is often counterproductive, as Dr. Bessel van der Kolk learned from one of his patients:

> Kathy turned towards me. "You know, Bessel," she said, … "after two years I trust you enough to tell you that those comments make me feel terrible. Yes, it's true; I instinctively blame myself for everything bad that happens to the people around me. I know that isn't rational, and I feel really dumb for feeling this way, but I do. When you try to talk me into being more reasonable, I feel even more lonely and isolated—and it confirms the feeling that nobody in the whole world will ever understand what it feels like to be me."
>
> I genuinely thanked her for her feedback, and I've tried ever since not to tell my patients that they should not feel the way they do. Kathy taught me that my responsibility goes much deeper: I have to help them reconstruct their inner map of the world.[101]

Professor Rev. Dr. Deborah Hunsinger's book *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care,* also emphasizes that competent pastoral caregiving validates another person's traumatic reaction rather than denying or minimizing their anguish as many caregivers

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99. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 91.

100. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 216.

101. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 130.

do. "Wanting those they love to be whole, they try to encourage them by *rationally explaining* why they should not be upset by so small a thing. Yet, nothing so completely obstructs the healing process as having someone offer the free advice to 'get over it' or 'put it behind them'…perhaps to the point of shaming them into silence and truly unbearable isolation."[102] Because people's life experiences have shaped their brains, bodies, and souls differently, an event that may seem only temporarily frightening to one person could produce overwhelming terror in another. Bible study leaders and caregivers need to listen carefully to each person's individual needs.

Van der Kolk is optimistic about healing victims of even extreme trauma:

> A deep love relationship, particularly during adolescence, when the brain once again goes through a period of exponential change, truly can transform us. So can the birth of a child, as our babies often teach us how to love. Adults who were abused or neglected as children can still learn the beauty of intimacy and mutual trust or have a deep spiritual experience that opens them to a larger universe.[103]

Healing often begins with a caring relationship. As one patient told Dr. van der Kolk, "I don't think I have ever had anyone look at me like that and say they were worried about me, and I am holding on to it like a treasure: the idea that I am worth being worried about by someone I respect and who does understand how deeply I am struggling now."[104] Dr. Hunsinger says that with compassion and understanding, a spiritual caregiver can present the "crucified Savior, a God who bears our grief and carries our sorrow, who heals by taking away the sin of the world,

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102. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 5, emphasis in original.

103. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 131.

104. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 136.

both the evil we suffer and the evil we do."[105] Hunsinger emphasizes that "the cross becomes gospel for the traumatized only if they are able to see there a divine love willing to bear what is unbearable for mortal, fallen human beings.… If God in Jesus Christ descends into the worst hell imaginable in order to deliver us from the hells we inflict upon one another, then such a God is worthy of our trust."[106] Those who were abused by their parents especially need a trustworthy father God, who also expresses himself as a loving mother. The Psalms of Lament (Pss 10, 13, 22, 31, 77, 86, etc.) show us how to cry out to God with our honest pain, grief, and rage, and how to listen as our Creator holds our pain and heals it.

Traumatized people can also be healed through prayer. Richard Foster advocates that "normally the aid of prayer and the aid of medicine should be pursued at the same time and with equal vigor, for both are gifts from God."[107] In his first experience praying for healing, Foster counseled a WWII veteran whose traumatic war experience turned him into an atheist. He "had lived in constant fear and bitterness for twenty-eight years. He would wake up at night, screaming and in a cold sweat."[108] Foster told him that Jesus Christ could heal that old painful memory, and the man accepted Foster's invitation to pray. Foster sat beside him, put his hand on the man's shoulder, and invited the Lord Jesus to go back to that day and walk through it with the man: "Please, Lord, draw out the hurt and the hate and the sorrow and set him

105. Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable*, 13.

106. Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable*, 13.

107. Foster, *Prayer*, 204.

108. Foster, *Prayer*, 205

free."[109] Jesus completely healed the man's memories, and for the first time in twenty-eight years he was able to sleep soundly and be happy. Foster cautions that if God in his wisdom answers *no* to a prayer, "under no circumstance are we to tell those receiving prayer that it is their fault: that they lack the faith, or that there must be some sin in them that is hindering the prayer, or any such thing."[110] Jesus asked us to pray for healing in his name to glorify God, so we can pray in faith and trust that God's will be done at the right time. Jesus is able to love and heal the brain, body, and soul of a traumatized person, to give freedom from fear and bitterness, to restore relationships, and to give hope for a joyful new life of loving and forgiving.

Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies

Jesus Christ enables us to love and forgive our enemies, and he also protects us from our enemies by establishing boundaries for our contacts with them. Because it is hard for many abused people to set healthy boundaries and because some class participants may be tempted to return to live with people who have violently abused them, the biblical and theological perspectives on these boundaries discussed in chapter two are included in a "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout distributed during the Bible study class.[111] This important topic is discussed again here in chapter three from the perspective of biblical scholars. Leaders need to be well prepared to discuss and model these healthy boundaries.

109. Foster, *Prayer*, 205.

110. Foster, *Prayer*, 207.

111. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

Many Hebrew Torah laws set limits on the abusive behavior of those in power. Hebrew laws also set boundaries between Israelites and Gentiles, such as laws forbidding intermarriage. The Torah laws of blood avenging show why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is such good news for those who have been hurt by enemies. In a case of deliberate murder, the Torah law requires purging the guilt of innocent blood from Israel (Deut 19:11-13):

> The law of blood-revenge (Blut-Rache) made it the sacred duty of the nearest relative to avenge the blood of his kinsman. He was called the Heb: *go'el ha-dam*, "the avenger of blood." This law was based upon the command given in Gen 9:5 f: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." … Ransom cannot be given for the life of a murderer; no expiation can be made for a murder but by the blood of the murderer (Dt 19:4 ff; Josh 20; 2 Sam 14:6 ff).[112]

When life hurts, Jesus Christ is our avenger of blood. He offered his own blood as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). For those who put their faith in him, he will deliver us from evil and give us ultimate justice for sins committed against us.

Torah law allowed someone who accidently killed a person to flee from the avenger to one of the six priestly cities of refuge for asylum. "Jesus is also the priestly city of refuge (His priestly office being the mean of our salvation), by fleeing into which man is safe; but [we must] abide in Him forever for eternal safety" (John 15:1-11).[113] When we commit sins against others, the blood of Jesus saves us if we confess our sins and repent. Jesus is our priestly redeemer.

Because Jesus is our avenger of blood, our redeemer, and our priestly city of refuge, Christians have new boundaries with their enemies. With the authority of God, Jesus gave his disciples a revolutionary new commandment: "Love your enemies and pray for those who

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112. James Orr and Melvin Grove Kyle, eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1939), BibleWorks v.10, s.v. "Goel."

113. A. R. Fausset, *Fausset Bible Dictionary (1888)* (n.p.: International Bible Translators, 1998), BibleWorks v.10, s.v. "Blood."

persecute you'" (Matt 5:44). Believers can trust our Savior to protect and defend us. In return, he commands us to love our enemies, pray for them, and trust God either to reform their souls or free us from their power. Jesus can free us from hatred and resentment, and he can enable us to forgive. If we have hurt another person, he commands us to confess our sins and be reconciled to that person (Matt 5:23-24). Jesus also teaches his followers five protective boundaries and limits for loving our enemies: be in God's will, be confident in God's Truth, be willing to set and enforce clear boundaries, be willing to wait, and be willing to walk away. The perspective of biblical scholars on these five boundaries is explained in the following sections.

Be in God's Will

> In his will is our peace.
>
> —Dante Alighieri, *Paradise, The Divine Comedy*

Jesus himself only ever did what God sent him to do. He lived according to God's will, so he was never operating outside of God's protection. God helps us to know his will through personal prayer, through the Holy Bible, and through the witness of faithful believers. Simon Chan advises, "How do I know that I am in God's will in this particular situation?… It requires spiritual sensitivity that comes with long experience [in a deep relationship with God]."[114] Chan believes that discernment for a community of faith is best exemplified in Acts when the entire church fasted and prayed together while making decisions. Ignatius of Loyola discerns being in God's will by looking for "growth in faith, hope and charity–the three theological virtues."[115]

114. Chan*, Spiritual Theology*, 200, 201, 208.

115. Chan*, Spiritual Theology*, 217.

Tilden Edwards looks for "twelve signs of 'truly spiritual and gracious' affections," such as loving God for God's sake rather than self-interest, wisdom, humility, having the spirit and temper of Jesus Christ, poise, orderliness, and lifelong consistency in Christian living.[116] Jesus, both fully divine and fully human, shows us in his humanity how to discern God's voice and live out God's will in everyday life.

For Eugene Peterson, congruence is the sign of being in God's will: "To live everything that God reveals to us in Scripture and Jesus and then live it in the neighborhood, in *our* neighborhood. Most of us know far more *about* God than we actually live in obedient faith *in* God."[117] When believers "start giving orders to the Spirit" instead of participating with genuine delight in what God is doing, their self-centered religion becomes a major barrier to faith for their children, their neighbors, and their enemies.[118] "Spiritual theology is the discipline and art of training us into a full and mature participation in Jesus's story while at the same time preventing us from taking over the story."[119] Believers are in God's will when both our spirit and our actions are congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Be Confident in God's Truth

When religious scholars started arguments with Jesus, he overcame them by speaking truth. As Chris Webb says, "Truth, after all, is vital… — solid, knowable principles and realities

116. Chan*, Spiritual Theology*, 217-219.

117. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 339, emphasis in original.

118. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 300.

119. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 199.

that can help guide our way."[120] In contrast, male and female abusers attack with lies, insults, contempt, and false shame. Their victims may fear that if they speak their truth—anger, pain, and grief—to God, he will retaliate and hurt them as their abuser has. The prophets and Psalms of Lament show how to grieve before God, who hears our truth and comforts suffering souls.[121]

Christian psychologist Dr. Diane Langberg writes, "The survivor is struggling with questions about God: 'Who is he? What does he think? What does he think about me? Am I forgivable? Does his patience run out? Why should I have hope?'"[122] A spiritual caregiver needs to embody both the grace and truth of God to change a survivor's fearful expectations. As Alvin Plantinga says, "Belief in God means *trusting* God, accepting Him, committing one's life to Him.… The fundamental truth about reality is truth about a *Person*."[123] Dr. Langberg urges spiritual leaders to help abused persons see the whole truth: "By your Christlikeness and faithful endurance, woo them out of their sorrow and night into the freedom-producing truth of God and his great love for them."[124] Jesus gave his life to help us fully become what God intended—forgiven, filled with grace and truth, and worthy of love and respect. God's truth will make us free.

120. Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 59.

121. See Jeremiah's Lamentations and Psalms 10, 13, 22, 31, 77, 86, etc.

122. Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 247.

123. Alvin Plantinga. *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 2, emphasis in original.

124. Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, 246, 283.

Be Willing to Set and Enforce Clear Boundaries

> When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated. —Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

> You best teach people about healthy boundaries by you enforcing your healthy boundaries on them.
> —Bryant McGill, "Conflict: Relationships, Boundaries, and Escaping"

Jesus set and enforced clear boundaries in his relationships with those who opposed and persecuted him. Christian churches have had many different ideas on how to set boundaries with sinners, from tight boundaries to looser boundaries.

In a time when churches tried to eliminate moral crimes by burning heretics at the stake, Menno Simons (1496–1561 AD), a former Roman Catholic priest and a contemporary of the Protestant Reformers, introduced "the 'ban' or 'shunning,' to be exercised by the [Mennonite] community against offenders until they repented."[125] His non-violent alternative was based on Biblical warnings not to associate or eat with a church member who is "guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler" (1 Cor 5:11) and not to "receive him into your house or give him any greeting" (2 John 1:10). Allender and Longman, in *Bold Love*, advise how to set boundaries for "three kinds of enemies in our lives—evil people, fools, and simpletons."[126] They believe that bold love must present truth, pursue reconciliation, and withhold forgiveness until the offender repents to be truly redemptive:

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125. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 363. Note: "On 7 December 1965 Vatican II accepted the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) which renounced in principle any use of external force against the voice of conscience." Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 285.

126. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 226.

> *Rebuke is bringing truth to bear in a person's life in the hope he will repent so the relationship can be restored*…. Rebuke is the wise and shrewd story telling of Nathan and the serene, faithful witness of Stephen's martyrdom. It is any form of communication that parlays truth before the eyes of the abuser. A second key to biblical restoration is withholding forgiveness from an unrepentant person while pursuing reconciliation.[127]

Allender and Longman cite the example of Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus warned Peter that he would betray him, he said he would pray for him, and he said he would receive him back. Simons, Allender, and Longman all teach truth-telling and withholding forgiveness from an unrepentant person while pursuing reconciliation and restoration.

Billy Graham and his associates set boundaries by emphasizing self-discipline. They determined to avoid the career-ending sins of previous evangelists by pledging themselves to their Modesto Manifesto principles: live on salary instead of offerings to avoid financial abuses; never meet, travel, or eat alone with a woman other than their wives to avoid sexual immorality; accept the crowd estimates of public officials to avoid exaggerated estimates; determine "never to publicly criticize local clergy and to cooperate with them everywhere possible" to avoid an antichurch and anticlerical spirit .[128] Instead of setting rigid theological boundaries, Graham worked with a broad spectrum of Christian communities: "I intend to go anywhere, sponsored by anybody…if there are no strings attached to my message…and not stoop to mudslinging, name-calling, and petty little fights over nonessentials."[129] Unlike many

127. Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1992), 181, emphasis in original. Also see Luke 17:3, "rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them."

128. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 213.

129. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 214.

evangelists, Billy Graham remained faithful to the Word of God, and he maintained his family life and a good reputation until his death at the age of 99.

Francis of Assisi had a more challenging approach to setting boundaries. Carol Flinders suggests that his chaste spiritual friendship with St. Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano sets a good example for men and women working together in ministry today:

> In their relationship the ardor of human sexuality was perfectly, beautifully sublimated—not suppressed or denied, but transformed, as the mystics have always insisted it can be, into a nearly boundless love for everyone around them.… The atmosphere that surrounds their memory is not one of desiccated, grim self-denial, but of merriment and outright joy.[130]

According to Chesterton, Francis walked out amid the constant wars of central Italy with empty hands, a loving heart, and remarkable courtesy and good manners, to teach a new and purer spirituality. "He honored all men; that is, he not only loved but respected them all," including popes, beggars, criminals, rulers, and St. Clare and her spiritual daughters.[131] Moving among lay people, he inspired them to share his spiritual way of life in their own homes. His radical, revolutionary love for everyone had a lasting influence on Christianity.

Jesus himself, on the cross, did not withhold forgiveness. He loved even those who crucified him, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). If we hear the Word of God, pray for guidance, and follow his will, God will show us how to set and enforce clear boundaries in our own situation.

130. Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 28.

131. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Image, 2013), 88.

Be Willing to Wait

When someone we love is abusive, sometimes we must wait to be reconciled until he or she is ready to repent. As Allender and Longman say, "Don't be pressured to make change occur in another person's life. Do accept the part you play in seeing change occur."[132] While we wait, God works in the lives of both the offender and the one who waits. Miroslav Volf says, "The truly revolutionary character of Jesus's proclamation lies precisely in the *connection between the hope he gives to the oppressed and the radical change he requires of them*."[133]

> Most of *us* when we are victims…need to repent of what the perpetrators do to our soul. Victims need to repent of the fact that all too often they mimic the behavior of the oppressors…to excuse their own reactive behavior…. Without repentance for these sins, the full human dignity of victims will not be restored and needed social change will not take place.[134]

The temptation for victims to mimic the behavior of their abusers is also mentioned in Jan Stets and Murray Straus's national survey study, which found that "45% of all IPV [intimate partner violence] is bilateral [on both sides], matched for severity of abuse."[135] In painful situations people are often not well prepared to express their anger appropriately, especially when an abuser is violent. The victim may retaliate, shut down, internalize the anger against themselves, or repress the anger and build up resentments that will someday burst into rage. Many people find it hard to pray and wait for God's wisdom before they act.

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132. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 179.

133. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 114, emphasis in original.

134. Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 117.

135. Donald G. Dutton, *The Abusive Personality: Violence and Control in Intimate Relationships*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 222, with footnote to Stets J, Straus MA. *The marriage license as a hitting license: Physical violence in American families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992).

For believers to truly forgive our abusers, we must receive the gift of grace to desire to see the abuser redeemed and reconciled to God and to us. We must also be ready to accept that "the swell of hope is often dashed against the shoals of a cruel, fallen world."[136] For those with faith that someday God will make all things right, "good hope is trust that greater good will prevail no matter how awful the awful remains."[137] God can nurture repentance and love in any person's heart, and God teaches us to pray and hope for reconciliation while we wait until the abuser is truly ready to repent.

Be Able to Walk Away

> O Lord, grant a little help…that I may see what to do, and what to leave undone.
> —Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), British Quaker philanthropist and prison reformer, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry: With Extracts from Her Journal and Letters*

Sometimes when people attacked Jesus, he knew that walking away was the best course of action. Saint Benedict of Nursia, Italy, followed the example of Jesus throughout conflicts in his life, with good results. In about 500 A.D. he walked away from his noble family and the dissolution, greed, and constant warfare of Roman society. He lived alone in a cave for three years, seeking God's help to subdue the vices of his own body and mind in single combat against the devil.[138] People in the area recognized him as a holy man and a worker of miracles and came to seek his guidance, so he walked away from the cave and gradually built thirteen

136. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 166.

137. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 177.

138. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 56.

monasteries. “For over two decades, Benedict led these monasteries in Subiaco, guiding the monks, teaching the children in the monastic schools, preaching, serving the local community, and working miracles large and small.”[139] Then an envious local priest attacked his work, and “Benedict soon found that facing another’s jealousy was one of the most difficult spiritual challenges he would ever handle.”[140] The priest attempted to poison Benedict’s food and tried to corrupt his monks by sending young women to dance obscenely in the monastery. Benedict appointed leaders and left Subiaco so the priest would stop terrorizing his monks. He walked away from his life’s work to an unknown destination, trusting God to guide him.

On Mount Cassino about seventy miles away, Benedict and a few disciples tore down a pagan temple and built a new monastery. “Benedict’s preaching drew the citizens of Cassinum back to the place where they had sacrificed to Apollo, and they began to worship the God of this kind holy man.”[141] He drew on Holy Scriptures and experience to create his Rule for prayer, obedience, chastity, diligence, non-violent behavior, hospitality, and respect for children, the elderly, and the sick. “The Rule teaches that prayer is the mightiest weapon and sincere kindness the strongest strategy.”[142] After Benedict walked away from conflict and trusted God to guide him, God blessed his ministry with increasing fruitfulness and influence.

It is often wise to set a boundary by walking away from conflict as Jesus did. It is also sometimes wise to walk away from the overwhelming needs of others. Foster advises, “Do not

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139. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 74.

140. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 74-75.

141. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 80.

142. Butcher, *Man of Blessing*, 85.

try to answer every cry of human need or respond to every instance of injustice. It would simply do you in."[143] Believers can ask God to give us discernment—"the divine ability to see what is actually going on and to know what needs to be done in any given situation"— to show us when to walk away.[144]

Summary

> It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy, is the quintessence of true religion.
>
> —Mahatma Gandhi, Hindu lawyer, social activist, and admirer of Jesus Christ, *Selections from Gandhi* by Nirmal Kumar Bose

Even when people are the most sinful, God sees the divine image within us and persistently calls each person to choose life in harmony with the Trinity. No matter how many times people sin, God can successfully help them change when they repent. Trusting in God's safe boundaries, believers can approach their enemies with the same faith, hope, and love that God shows for all of us. With prayer and discernment, believers can reach out to those living in darkness with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Stephen Macchia gives the example of Hugh Corey, a man who was "epic in love" for the people of Bangladesh. Hugh took the words of Christ to heart: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (Matt 10:40, NIV). Corey believed, "In everything I do I must make myself receivable to the people God places in my life.… They

143. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 181.

144. Foster, *Prayer*, 231.

must receive me and receive through me the amazing love God alone has authored."[145] While Christians must honor God's protective boundaries to avoid foolish risks, Corey believed that making ourselves receivable means removing all the barriers that we put up to protect ourselves from painful or costly relationships. It means making the first move instead of avoiding conflicts and potentially difficult people. When God places a person in our lives, it means being more concerned for the welfare of that person's soul than for our personal comfort and convenience. Hugh Corey effectively "focused his daily energies on growing in the grace and knowledge of God, and it was out of that inner strength that his life of love overflowed to others."[146] Corey's love helped many people to know the redeeming love of God.

In another present-day example of courageous, hopeful outreach, eighteen churches formed a network to pray and witness together each year at the October gathering of witches and tourists in Salem, Massachusetts. "God has brought eighty-two former witches to faith in Christ over the years," reports Pastor Steigler, whose church in Salem is the center of this nationwide prayer and witnessing network.[147] Worshipping, praying, and serving in a united effort greatly increases the effectiveness of a Gospel outreach into this community.

Even when people seem far away, the Triune God persistently calls each person to choose a loving relationship with the Triune God. In Dallas Willard's joyful vision,

> We should think of our destiny as being absorbed in a tremendously creative team effort, with unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast plane of activity, with ever more comprehensive cycles of productivity and enjoyment…in a cosmoswide,

145. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 136.

146. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 138.

147. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 180.

> cooperative pursuit of a created order that continuously approaches but never reaches the limitless goodness and greatness of the triune personality of God, its source.[148]

Working within God's wise boundaries, believers can reach out to those living in darkness with the good news that God loves all people and forgives us in order to transform us and restore our souls. Those who repent and return can have the glorious relationship they were created to have with God. Our Lord calls all people to participate in the transformation of themselves and even their enemies if they will joyfully cooperate and follow him.

All these principles from the life and teachings of Jesus effectively meet the spiritual and practical needs of those who have experienced abuse and broken relationships. The thesis of this work is that praying together in a small group, studying and meditating on the life and teachings of Jesus about loving and forgiving, and encouraging each other to share God's love with others will lead to experiencing God's spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. To test this thesis, the author developed a "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Bible study to meet the spiritual and practical needs described in chapters one, two and three. Chapter four describes and demonstrates the results of this thesis-project Bible study.

148. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 399.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT DESIGN

Connecting with Ministry Needs

Shortly before beginning the D.Min. program I was asked to conduct a Bible study for a ministry that provides transitional housing and discipleship for Christian women coming out of abusive relationships or prison. Many of the women were new Christians and were just beginning to learn about the heart and mind of God. Like all Christians, they struggled with guilt, shame, pain, anger, and conflicts with God and with people. The most useful study, I determined, would explore what the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches on radically loving and forgiving ourselves and our enemies when life hurts.

Another group of women said that loving and forgiving was a need in their own lives and asked to study it. A Christian family asked me to teach the class in their home. I was invited to teach it for a group of college-age students. These four groups represented a wide diversity of ages and spiritual maturity. Twenty-seven people began a class and took the pre-test. Only eleven people finished the full eight-week class and took the post-test, due to people moving away, attrition, one death, and the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

The study focused on the teachings of the Holy Bible rather than insights from psychology or sociology. My foundation is the whole counsel of the Triune God in the Old and New Testaments, and my primary authority is Jesus Christ and his teachings in the Gospels. Because classes included people from various Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, I did not refer to theological works that could shut off communication with some people because of

historical theological disputes. All Christian denominations accept Jesus Christ and the Bible, which offer uniquely powerful grace and truth. Choosing the scriptures was the most important and challenging part of developing the class, and I prayed for guidance. Dr. Margaret Wheeler, an experienced retreat leader and my spiritual director, also helped to focus my selections on those most related to the Beatitudes and the spiritual needs of the participants. My pilot Bible study classes likewise suggested scriptures that were most helpful to them in loving and forgiving themselves and their enemies.

Project Structure

For my D.Min. thesis-project topic, "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts," I developed a Bible study on God's effective way to heal relationships. The focus was on principles from Creation (Gen 1-3), the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49), illustrated by contemporary personal stories. The scriptures show how God loves and forgives to initiate reconciliation with his created people and how they can respond by being reconciled to God. God's way of reconciliation is our model for reconciliation with others.

My thesis is that meeting in a small Bible study group to pray, worship, and meditate on scriptures and stories about loving and forgiving will lead to a closer relationship with the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who is transcendent, incarnate, and immanent in the world. The grace and truth of Jesus bring freedom from the dark clouds of fear and anger that block the light of God. He can bring inner peace and new life through the Holy Spirit and heal the hurts from painful relationships. To test this thesis, I gave participants a pre-test before the

class and a post-test during the last class, exploring the outcomes that participants experienced.[1]

The Bible study included eight 90-minute sessions, meeting weekly, to meet the spiritual needs described in chapters two and three. To keep participants attentive for ninety minutes, I included prayer, singing, worship, meditation, and discussion to engage mental, emotional, and spiritual perceptions. As Richard Greenham writes, "To read and not to meditate is unfruitful; to meditate and not to read is dangerous; to read and meditate without prayer is hurtful."[2] Each week I gave participants a two- or three-page handout, shown in Appendix B. Each week's theme was set by teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:1-16 from the Sermon on the Mount. The first page had a Taizé worship song, an outline of the *Lectio Divina* prayer form, and scripture to read aloud in class. The second and sometimes third page for each week had related scriptures, quotations, and contemporary personal stories for prayer and meditation at home. Each lesson ended with a blessing prayer from scripture.

Sessions began by checking in briefly with each participant and asking a question about the previous week's lesson. I also asked participants to turn in their homework and to identify any questions they had about it.[3] The worship part of the Bible study began with a prayer, followed by reading the Beatitudes for the lesson. Then we sang the Taizé worship song printed in the lesson. I purchased the Taizé worship songs and played them through my cell phone and

1. See Appendix D for the pre-test and post-test.

2. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 158.

3. See Appendix C for homework handout questions.

a speaker.[4] The worship song helped us to transition from the stresses of the day into a contemplative frame of mind to prepare for the scripture reading.

Next, following the *Lectio Divina* outline printed in the handout, I asked three different people to read the scripture demonstrating the theme for the lesson. Participants discussed what the scriptures meant to them. I used modern translations that were easiest to understand for people of various educational levels. I encouraged participants to compare the text to their Bibles, but when I tried having participants read from their own Bibles, it was hard for the group to follow along with the different versions.

As time allowed, we briefly read and considered the additional material in the lesson handout. Then we read and discussed the homework questions to give participants a head start writing in answers. At the end of the lesson, one of the participants read the scripture blessing prayer. We closed the meeting by praying for needs mentioned and by praying the Lord's Prayer together. I also asked participants to pray the blessing prayer during the week for themselves, their loved ones, and one person who had caused them pain.

In Week 1, "Created Very Good in the Image of God, and Blessed," participants took the pre-test. We then prayerfully read (*Lectio Divina*) Genesis 1:26-31 to establish how God created us in His image, why God loves us, and who we are in God's eyes.

In Week 2, "The Serpent Deceives and Grieves," we read and discussed Genesis 3:1-15 describing the deception and sin that tempts us to fear and hide from God. We also read and discussed Luke 1:35 and Galatians 4:4-6, telling how the prophecy of a Messiah Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

4. See Appendix F for Taizé Community Copyright Information.

In Weeks 3-6 we considered one or two Beatitudes in succession from Matthew 5:5-12 and prayerfully read (*Lectio Divina*) a New Testament scripture that illustrated them.

In Week 7 we prayerfully read (*Lectio Divina*) Matthew 5:13-16, the teaching of Jesus that his disciples are to be "salt" and "light" in a dark world, and 2 Corinthians 4:5-7, Paul's teaching that we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the power comes from God.

In Week 8 we prayerfully read (*Lectio Divina*) Matthew 5:1-16, reviewing all the Beatitudes and the teaching of Jesus to be "salt" and "light" in a dark world. Then participants took the post-test. I encouraged each participant to look for opportunities to participate joyfully in the ministry of reconciliation that God entrusted to his disciples and to use what they had learned to help others who were hurting.

Class Goals

These are the goals of the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" Bible study:

1. For each participant to see themselves through the eyes of Jesus Christ and to feel blessed, forgiven, and loved by the God who created them in His image.

2. For each participant to understand the grace and mercy of God, to repent and turn back to God as needed, to feel forgiven, and to be reconciled to God in love.

3. For each participant to forgive themselves for any guilt and shame from being sinned against by deception, exploitation, and/or abuse, especially if they were sinned against as children.

4. For each participant to begin to let God free them from any resentment, bitterness, or unforgiveness, and to begin to let God heal them and enable them to move on from the past into a new life of grace and truth.

5. For each participant to see themselves as disciples of Jesus Christ being sent as "salt" and "light" into a dark world (Matt 5:13-16) and being invited to participate in God's plan to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven.

6. For each participant to begin to see those who hurt them through the eyes of Jesus Christ, who wants to save, redeem, and transform that person or persons.

7. For each participant to pray blessing prayers from scripture for God, for themselves, for the person(s) who hurt them, and for their loved ones.

8. For each participant to participate joyfully in the ministry of reconciliation that God has entrusted to his disciples.

Pre-test and Post-test

The pre-test and post-test are identical.[5] The pre-test was given on the first day of the class and the post-test was given on the last day. Their purpose was to show whether the class helped participants to better understand God's redeeming love and forgiveness. The tests also showed if the class helped participants to achieve the class goals shown above. The test began with six questions for participants to answer by circling numbers on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 to express how much they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement about their relationship with God. The test also included fourteen short answer questions similar to the ten homework questions.[6] The test questions and results are discussed in the Test Findings section.

5. See Appendix D for the pre-test and post-test.

6. See Appendix C for homework handout questions.

Project Classes

Basic Demographics of Thesis-Project Class Participants

The eleven participants who completed the class were all women, mostly in their twenties and thirties, but a few in their fifties and sixties. All were from Philadelphia or the surrounding suburbs. Three were suburban church participants and eight were transitional housing ministry participants. All of the transition ministry participants had been in abusive relationships and about half had come from prison. The six participants in the college-age group started with enthusiasm, but they stopped coming as the semester progressed. None of them finished the class. No questions were asked to determine age, ethnicity, family status, or occupation. I observed that eight were white and three were African-American. I learned that at least seven had children, two were married, one was divorced, and two were widows. Most of the participants were working. About half of the class had professional occupations, such as nursing or teaching. About half the class had not gone to college and had retail or food service jobs. One was retired and doing volunteer work.

All participants completing the survey identified themselves as Christians. They all attended church regularly and studied the Bible, although some had made a commitment or re-commitment to Christ only within the previous two or three years. Most of them were not very familiar with the whole Bible or with theological words and concepts.

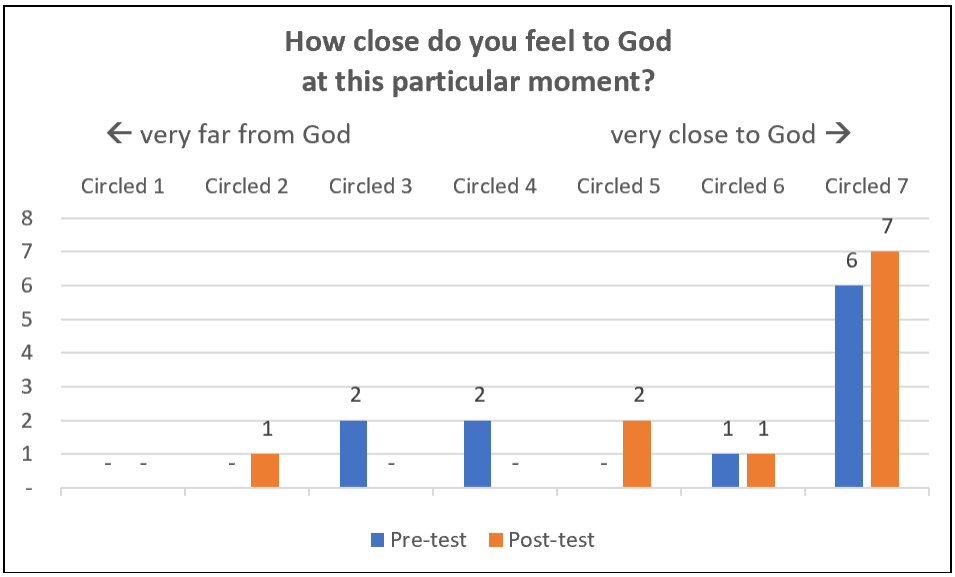
The individual pre-test and post-test answers given by the eleven participants who finished the class are given in detail in Appendix E and are analyzed in the following Test Findings section. Pre-test answers given by the sixteen participants who did *not* finish the class and take the post-test are also given in Appendix E.

Test Findings

Question 1. How close do you feel to God at this particular moment?

Question 1 asked participants to indicate how close they felt to God at this particular moment by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I feel very far from God) to 7 (I feel very close to God). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 1 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 1. How close do you feel to God?

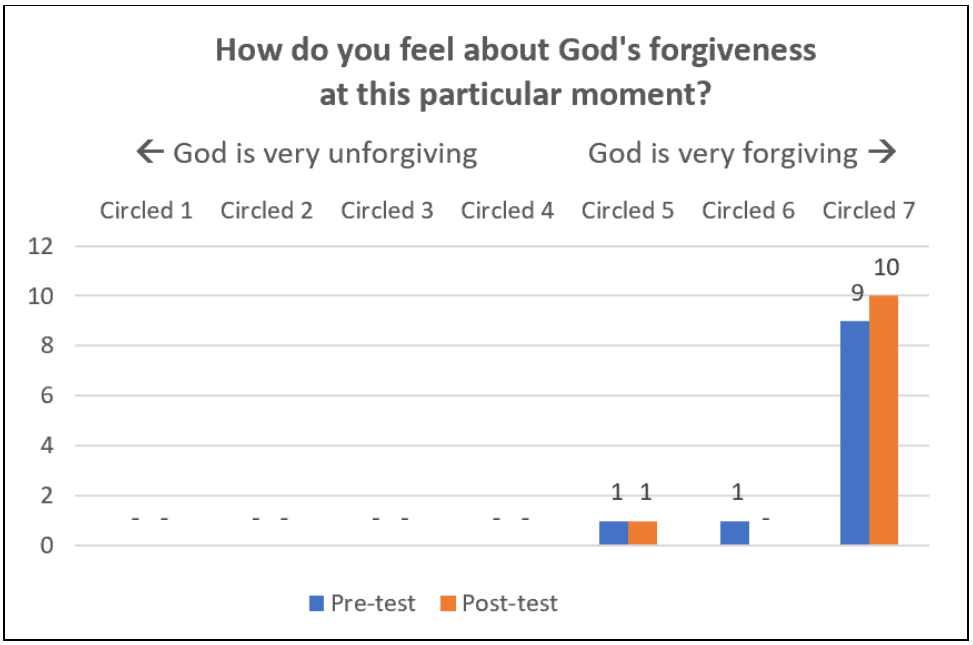


A majority of the eleven participants who finished the class circled 7 to indicate they felt very close to God "at this particular moment"—55% before and 64% after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, only 25% circled 7.) After the class there was a general shift in feeling closer to God, with one exception; however, that person answered questions 2-6 by circling 7s, indicating closeness to God. The sample size is too small to be significant.

Question 2. How do you feel about God's forgiveness at this particular moment?

Question 2 asked participants to indicate how they felt about God's forgiveness by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (God is very unforgiving) to 7 (God is very forgiving). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 2 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 2. How do you feel about God's forgiveness?

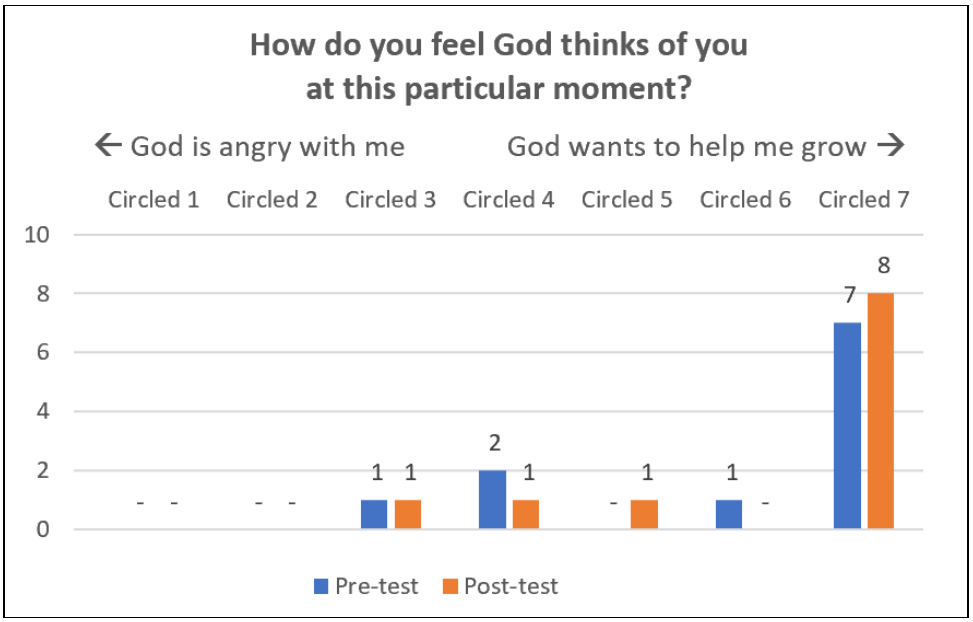


A strong majority of the participants circled 7 to indicate they felt that God is very forgiving—82% before and 91% after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, only 56% circled 7.) After the class one more participant felt that God is very forgiving.

Question 3. How do you feel God thinks of you at this particular moment?

Question 3 asked participants to indicate how they felt God thinks of them by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (God is angry with me) to 7 (God wants to help me grow). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 3 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 3. How do you feel God thinks of you?

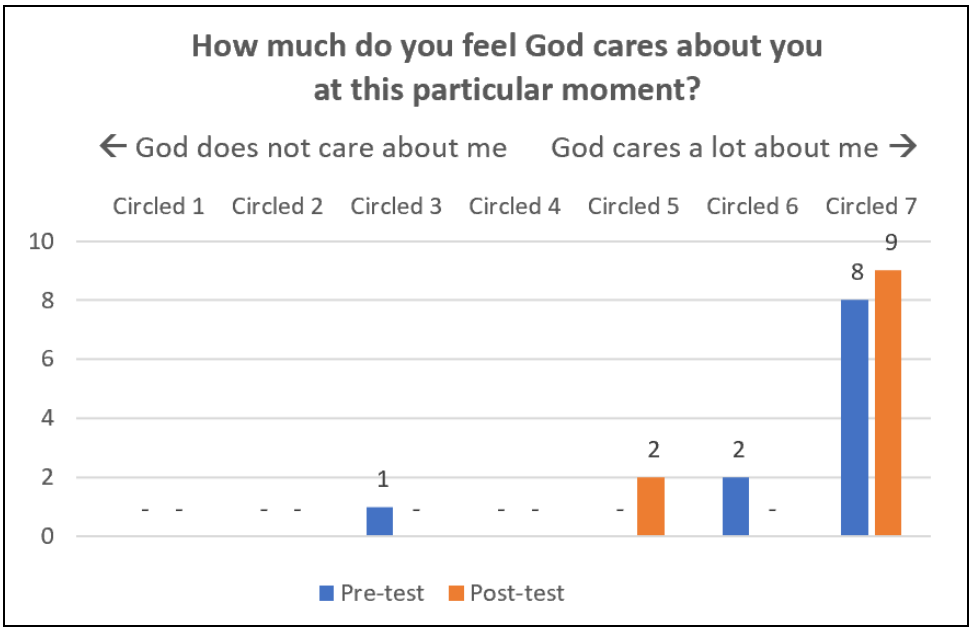


A majority of the participants circled 7 to indicate they felt that God definitely wants to help them grow—64% before and 73% after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, 63% circled 7.) After the class one more participant circled a seven.

Question 4. How much do you feel God cares about you at this particular moment?

Question 4 asked participants to indicate how they felt about how much God cares about them by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (God does not care that much about me) to 7 (God cares a lot about me). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 4 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 4. How much do you feel God cares about you?

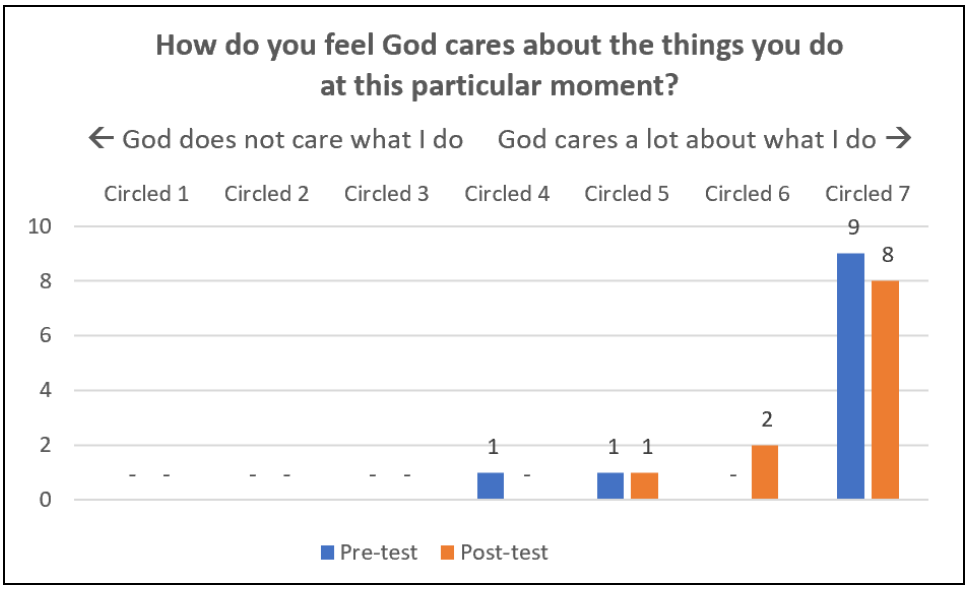


A majority of the participants circled 7 to indicate they felt that God cares a lot about them—73% before and 82% after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, 69% circled 7.) After the class one more participant circled a seven. One participant circled a lower number, a 5 instead of a 6, based on that particular moment.

Question 5. How do you feel God cares about the things you do at this particular moment?

Question 5 asked participants to indicate how they felt God cares about the things they do by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (God does not care much about what I do) to 7 (God cares a lot about what I do). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 5 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 5. How do you feel God cares about the things you do?

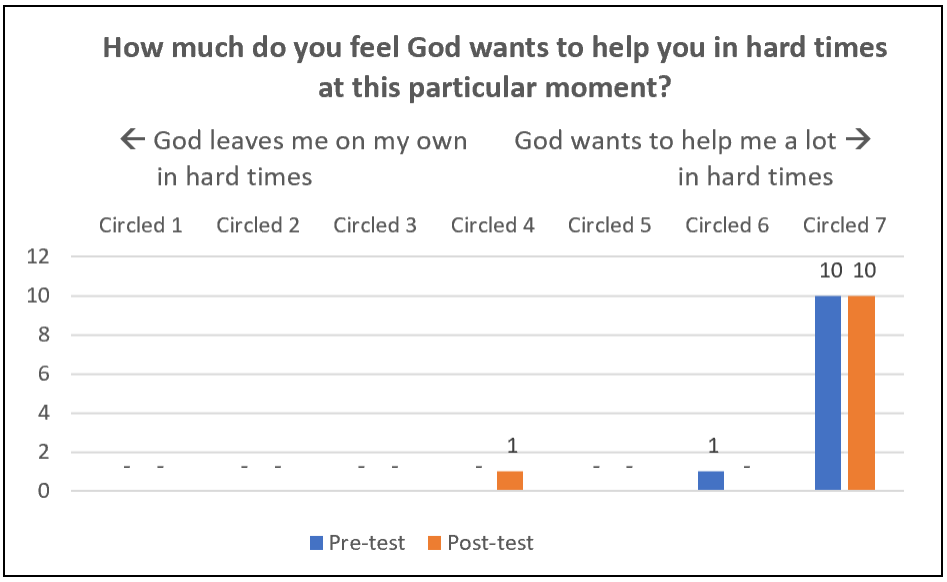


A majority of the participants circled 7 to indicate they felt that God cares a lot about what they do—82% before and 73% after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, 69% circled 7.) After the class one less participant circled a seven, based on that particular moment. The sample size is too small to be significant.

Question 6. How much do you feel God wants to help you in hard times?

Question 6 asked participants to indicate how much they felt God wanted to help them in hard times by circling numbers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (God leaves me on my own in hard times) to 7 (God wants to help me a lot in hard times). Aggregate pre-test answers are shown by blue columns and aggregate post-test answers are shown by orange columns in table 6 below. The table does not include those who only took the pre-test and did not finish the class. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Table 6. How much do you feel God wants to help you in hard times?



Ninety-one percent of the participants circled 7 to indicate they felt that God wants to help them a lot in hard times both before and after the class. (Of participants who did *not* finish the class, 63% circled 7.) After the class one participant circled a lower number. That person could have either been going through some difficult circumstances that day or could have felt farther from God for another reason. The sample size is too small to be significant.

Questions 7-20 below are short-answer questions. Participant test dates include only the month and year to preserve confidentiality, since participants completed the post-test in various small group classes. Individual participant pre-test and post-test answers can be compared by examining Appendix E.

Question 7. What about the topic 'loving and forgiving when life hurts' interests you or intrigues you?

Question 7 asked, "What about the topic 'loving and forgiving when life hurts' interests you or intrigues you?" Before the class, participants mentioned wanting to reconcile with someone, wanting to repent, needing to forgive, and "how much forgiveness is for you."[7]

After the class, some participants mentioned doing God's will even when you are hurting, reading God's Word, forgiving others as God forgives you, and feeling confident that God loves and forgives. One said, "The possibilities that can come to you when you're hurting and choose to love instead of hate…, to forgive rather than hold a grudge & be angry all the time."[8] Their responses showed an increased ability to see relationships from God's perspective and an increased confidence that God forgives us.

Question 8. How would you briefly describe who God is and how God feels about you?

Question 8 asked, "How would you briefly describe who God is and how God feels about you?" Both before and after the class, participants expressed love, reverence, and respect for

7. Participant L, Question 7 Pre-test Response, September 2018. (Note: test dates include only the month and year to preserve confidentiality.)

8. Participant E, Question 7 Post-test Response, February 2019.

God. Before the class, participants mentioned God's love, forgiveness, wisdom, strength, personal care, and protection. God's personal faithfulness was important to many: "God is who I rely on, one person I know is always there for me, the one person I know loves me."[9] For those who have been betrayed, abandoned, and abused by people, God's faithfulness is a rare and comforting source of stability.

After the class, participants mentioned God's all-knowing power, perfection, healing, tenderness, love, and salvation. Again, God's personal faithfulness was important to many: "God is my heavenly father, He is always there for me & I know He loves me as His child. I can always go to Him."[10]

Question 9. Name one or two ways God has acted to help people in the Bible and in recent human history.

Question 9 asked, "Name one or two ways God has acted to help people in the Bible and in recent human history." Before the class, participants mentioned God helping people with food, clothing, shelter, healing, saving lives, and miracles, such as helping Samson to regain his strength, helping Sarah have a child, helping Moses part the Red Sea, and helping Daniel in the lions' den. Participants mentioned God's personal help with medications, legal issues, comfort, and strength. One said, "God used people to teach me so much about Him, His love, mercy, grace & forgiveness."[11]

9. Participant J, Question 8 Pre-test Response, January 2020.

10. Participant J, Question 8 Post-test Response, July 2020.

11. Participant E, Question 9 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

After the class, participants mentioned similar ways God helps people. They also mentioned God inspiring men of integrity to fight against slavery; giving Joseph wisdom, prosperity, faith and humility; helping Muslims meet Christ; calling people on missions to save souls; teaching through His word; and giving us the Holy Spirit. One expressed confidence in God's forgiveness: "The O.T. is proof that people fail God time after time, but God is always showing mercy on them."[12]

Question 10. What are some parts of the Bible and recent human history that are hard to understand or do not seem to make sense?

Question 10 asked, "What are some parts of the Bible and recent human history that are hard to understand or do not seem to make sense?" Before the class, participants mentioned some books of the prophets and Revelation, the Twin Towers attack, people's sickness, unbelief, and the immeasurable extent of God's love. One said, "Unanswered prayer. Why those who do not believe are very blessed and I suffer? Lack of healing."[13]

After the class, participants mentioned predestination; all the laws, rules, and detailed temple measurements in the Old Testament; the Holocaust; 9/11; people's cruelty and refusal to admit being wrong; and separation of immigrant mothers and children. One said, "Sometimes it's hard to understand why he loves us so much, when we've sinned."[14] The subjects of forgiveness or loving your enemy were not mentioned as hard to understand.

12. Participant D, Question 9 Post-test Response, May 2019.

13. Participant B, Question 10 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

14. Participant J, Question 10 Post-test Response, July 2020.

Question 11. Name one or two of the most important personal troubles or conflicts people had in the Bible and in recent human history, as you see it.

Question 11 asked, "Name one or two of the most important personal troubles or conflicts people had in the Bible and in recent human history, as you see it." Before the class, participants mentioned Biblical personal conflicts such as Cain and Abel, Abraham's sons Ishmael and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, and Judas and Jesus. They mentioned recent troubles such as Israel and Palestine, sexual harassment and immorality, floods, downfalls from love of money, having doubt, and going to jail. One said, "People having hard lives. They don't know God. People not getting salvation in their lives."[15]

After the class, participants mentioned personal conflicts and alienation from God, such as doubt, unbelief, rebellion, sin, anger, unforgiveness, church and state conflicts, political conflicts, slavery and oppression, hatred of people with different sexual orientation, and abortion. One said, "I see a theme of disobedience in the Bible. Not wanting to sacrifice and do things God's way."[16]

Question 12. What similar troubles or conflicts are you or other people having today?

Question 12 asked, "What similar troubles or conflicts are you or other people having today?" Before the class, participants mentioned hurtful gossip, pride, hypocrisy, lack of love, family conflicts, and troubles sharing custody of children. They also mentioned internal

15. Participant J, Question 11 Pre-test Response, January 2020.

16. Participant D, Question 11 Post-test Response, May 2019.

struggles such as breaking free of habits and managing stability. One said, "I feel God has forgotten me."[17]

After the class, participants mentioned the suffering of heroes of the faith, doubt, unbelief, rebellion and disobedience to God, sin, love and trust issues, hurtful gossip and criticism, and lack or denial of medical services to working people. One mentioned the reality of hypocrisy: "Reconciling with how the Bible is used to discriminate and oppress."[18] Another spoke of the challenge of growing spiritually: "Dying to self daily. Letting go of worldly behaviors and giving God more control."[19]

Question 13. Name one or two important promises that God made to people in the Bible.

Question 13 asked, "Name one or two important promises that God made to people in the Bible." Before the class, participants mentioned promises of childbirth, the land of Israel, the return of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as a helper. Five participants mentioned God's promise that He would never leave us or forsake us, three mentioned the promise of eternal life, two mentioned the promise of unconditional love, and one mentioned God's promise of salvation through Jesus.

After the class, two participants mentioned God's promise that He would never leave us or forsake us, four mentioned the promise of eternal life, one mentioned the promise of unconditional love, and four mentioned God's promise of salvation through Jesus. They also

17. Participant B, Question 12 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

18. Participant B, Question 12 Post-test Response, July 2019.

19. Participant D, Question 12 Post-test Response, May 2019.

mentioned God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of nations, his promise to Noah that he would never make another flood, and his promise of a long life to those who obey parents. One quoted the Beatitudes: "Blessed [are] the meek, Blessed pure Heart [sic]."[20] God's promises of unconditional love, forgiveness, healing, eternal life, eternal peace, and the heavenly Kingdom were important to the participants, especially, "I will never leave you or forsake you." After the class four participants mentioned God's promise of salvation through Jesus, compared to one before the class.

Question 14. How do God's promises give you hope for living through your troubles or conflicts today?

Question 14 asked, "How do God's promises give you hope for living through your troubles or conflicts today?" Before the class, participants mentioned God's promises to forgive, not to lie, never to leave us or forsake us, to provide for our needs and take care of us, to take our burdens, to bring good out of anything, and to bring us through. Two participants found hope in knowing that God keeps his promises.

After the class, participants mentioned God's promises for love and protection, for wisdom and guidance, for healing sins, for answering prayer with help, for hope for a better tomorrow, for all things being possible, and for eternal life. Four participants mentioned God's promises that He would never leave us or forsake us, would always be there for us, and would bring us through tribulations. For example, "That he's a constant God. That he's never going to

20. Participant K, Question 13 Post-test Response, July 2020.

abandon me like people have in my past. That I can always count on my God."[21] The dependable presence and power of God gave great comfort and hope to most of the participants.

Question 15. How do you know or feel that God is active in your life and your world?

Question 15 asked, "How do you know or feel that God is active in your life and your world?" Before the class, participants mentioned sensing God's presence and protection, feeling the Holy Spirit, having joy instead of sadness, having confidence that God is who he says he is, gaining knowledge and wisdom through the Bible and Christians, and experiencing fulfilled promises, blessings, and their lives getting better. One said, "He is always there when I need Him. By helping me get through all of my trials and tribulations."[22]

After the class, participants mentioned being able to love people, feeling the Holy Spirit, being convicted of sin, knowing right from wrong, experiencing physical and spiritual help, experiencing answered prayers, miracles, and abundant blessings, and experiencing new birth and a life changed for the better. One said, "Looking back to see how far I have come. It's only by God's strength that I have been able to grow and keep moving forward."[23] Participants expressed confidence that God is active in their lives for good.

21. Participant D, Question 14 Post-test Response, May 2019.

22. Participant J, Question 15 Pre-test Response, January 2020.

23. Participant D, Question 15 Post-test Response, May 2019.

Question 16. How do God's grace, truth and forgiveness empower you to take action in your own situations?

Question 16 asked, "How do God's grace, truth and forgiveness empower you to take action in your own situations?" Before the class, participants mentioned that God gives strength to act; gives steadfast love, grace, hope, encouragement, and forgiveness; gives light and protection; lifts them up; helps them to be forgiving; and empowers them to work for the Lord. One said, "I need to make the effort, looking unto Jesus. I need to be reminded that these are some of His attributes and then get in sync with Him."[24] Another said, "If God can forgive me and love me — take care of me, then who am I to not be like that with others."[25]

After the class, participants mentioned that God gives strength and wisdom to do his will; he gives faith, grace, and love that inspires them to love and forgive others; he gives hope and blessings for a good future; and he enables them to depend on him, stand up for themselves, and live a righteous life. One said, "It helps me depend on Him and His goodness and have confidence I'm not alone and He will help."[26] Another said, "Because if God can forgive me, who am I not to forgive?"[27] Most participants who finished the class relied on God to help them in their great need both before and after the class.

24. Participant C, Question 16 Pre-test Response, March 2020.

25. Participant E, Question 16 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

26. Participant I, Question 16 Post-test Response, February 2019.

27. Participant D, Question 16 Post-test Response, May 2019.

Question 17. When you were a child, what did you learn about "loving and forgiving when life hurts" from your parents or others?

Question 17 asked, "When you were a child, what did you learn about 'loving and forgiving when life hurts' from your parents or others?" Before the class, one-third of the participants—three who finished the class and six who did not finish—said they learned "nothing" or "not much" about loving and forgiving when life hurts. Others learned not to hold a grudge, to forgive readily, to forgive as the key to joy, that Jesus loved them, and that they had to forgive because God did. One said, "I grew up in church but went through abuse, so I learned to hide the truth so that everyone thinks things are perfect."[28] Another said, "We'd get beat or whatever but then 5 minutes later it's over so just forgive and move on."[29] Another learned "not to repent. To forget but not necessarily forgive."[30] One participant who did not finish the class said, "When life hurts, shove it down & don't let it get you down."[31]

After the class, six participants said they learned nothing about forgiveness as a child. Some said they learned to move on, forget about it, and get over it. They did not learn to process the pain, and they didn't see forgiveness in a healthy way. Some were taught that Jesus loved them, and they were taught to pray and not to hurt others. One learned "to forgive and keep moving forward—you don't have to continue to let the person/people be in your life, but

28. Participant D, Question 17 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

29. Participant H, Question 17 Pre-test Response, December 2018.

30. Participant B, Question 17 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

31. Participant V, Question 17 Pre-test Response, March 2020.

you do have to let go of the pain in order to move forward."[32] Another said, "Forgive quickly, tomorrow you [might?] be gone. God forgives us."[33]

Question 18. What does the word "forgiveness" mean to you?

Question 18 asked, "What does the word "forgiveness" mean to you?" Before the class, participants mentioned that some people are easy to forgive, some are difficult, and forgiveness is confusing, They said forgiveness meant being humble in heart, choosing not to take offense even when you are right, releasing the offender from your judgment and being released from God's judgment, letting go of the offense and moving forward, not holding grudges or anger, trusting God to handle the situation or person, and being washed clean. One said, "to let go of the negative action against me and move forward with or without the person in my life."[34] Another said, "Don't hold grudges or anger. Just move past it. If you hold anger you make yourself sick."[35] Another said, "If you forgive others then God will forgive you of your sins."[36]

After the class, participants mentioned similar thoughts, as well as giving of yourself, softening your heart, and acknowledging your hurt and pain. Two people spoke of the need to protect yourself while forgiving. One said, "to let go of an offense but not to the point of letting

32. Participant E, Question 17 Post-test Response, February 2019.

33. Participant H, Question 17 Post-test Response, February 2019.

34. Participant E, Question 18 Pre-test Response, September 2018.

35. Participant H, Question 18 Pre-test Response, December 2018.

36. Participant J, Question 18 Pre-test Response, January 2020.

yourself be hurt."[37] Another said, "Forgive easily but remember and protect yourself too."[38] One person suggested praying for the offender, and another suggested loving them and wishing them well. Two participants said loving and forgiving the offender brought healing for yourself. These new responses showed that participants absorbed teachings of Jesus that were discussed in the class.

Question 19. How would you briefly explain the difference between forgiving someone and excusing someone?

Question 19 asked, "How would you briefly explain the difference between forgiving someone and excusing someone?" Both before and after the class most of the participants did not make clear theological distinctions between forgiving someone and excusing someone. The lessons need additional clarity on this. However, I hope participants think about the significant differences between forgiving someone and excusing someone in future conflicts.

Before the class, participants said that in forgiving you give it to God and in excusing you hold it against them; forgiving is choosing to love and excusing is making excuses and pretending; forgiving is releasing from judgment and excusing is letting them off the hook; forgiving is apologizing and accepting forgiveness and excusing is not accepting forgiveness; forgiving is for a major offense and excusing is for a minor offense; and forgiving means you don't hold it against the offender and excusing is making excuses for the offender and letting it

37. Participant I, Question 18 Post-test Response, February 2019.

38. Participant H, Question 18 Post-test Response, February 2019.

go. One said, “God does hold us accountable, but also says go and sin no more. He doesn’t excuse. He forgives.”[39]

After the class, participants said that forgiving includes all perceived transgression and excusing is limited to a specific situation; forgiving is coming to terms with the offense on your own and excusing is lessening the blame; forgiving comes from God and excusing is only temporary; forgiving is letting go and excusing is still holding on; forgiving is letting go but guarding against future offenses and excusing is letting go and opening up for trouble again; forgiving someone is going to them and telling them you forgive them and excusing someone is just overlooking it; and forgiving is just moving on and excusing is verbally excusing them. One participant showed more theological understanding, saying, “Excusing is like validating the hurt as being acceptable—it is not acceptable—and forgiving cancels out the offense as the debt being paid.”[40]

Question 20. What is your greatest challenge in healing relationships after trouble or a conflict?

Question 20 asked, “What is your greatest challenge in healing relationships after trouble or a conflict?” Before the class, participants mentioned challenges in fear of rejection, getting rid of hurt, how to stop thinking about the conflict, staying away, how best to respond, taking the blame for everything, learning to trust again, knowing that God's love is in the middle of the relationship, forgiving, letting go and letting God. One said, “Trust. I learned at a very

39. Participant C, Question 19 Pre-test Response, March 2020.

40. Participant E, Question 19 Post-test Response, February 2019.

young age that the world is [harsh?] and my trust was broken many times throughout my life so it's hard because I'm guarded especially in trusting."[41] One person who did not finish the class said, "Trying to bite my tongue…maybe to the point of not saying things that need to be said in order for true healing."[42]

After the class, participants mentioned challenges in forgiving themselves and others, disappointment that the offender didn't repent, healing their heart, guilt, creating healthy boundaries, knowing if the offender is really there for them or not, praying, and keeping their joy in God. Three people mentioned challenges in building trust. One said, "Facing the pain I caused without excuses, not letting my guilty conscience beat me up for being the source of hurt. Trust is the biggest hurdle when someone hurts me."[43] Another said, "going to them sometimes it's hard, but I know I have to forgive them and love them as Christ loves me. So God will forgive me also."[44] Trusting people after a conflict was a challenge for many participants, which made God's trustworthiness all the more important to them.

Summary

The pre-test and post-test gave me a good understanding of what participants learned from the class, especially short-answer questions 7-20.[45] The test questions not only show if the

41. Participant D, Question 20 Pre-test Response, May 2019.

42. Participant U, Question 20 Pre-test Response, October 2018.

43. Participant E, Question 20 Post-test Response, February 2019.

44. Participant J, Question 20 Post-test Response, July 2020.

45. See Appendix E for the Pre-test and Post-test.

class goals were met but also show what needs to be covered in follow-up classes. Likert scale questions 1-5 could have been improved by eliminating the words “at this particular moment,” which could prompt an answer based on adverse circumstances of the day rather than on a relationship with God. The test also could be improved by eliminating questions 9 and 11, combining questions 13 and 14, combining questions 15 and 16, and combining questions 18 and 19. The shorter test would be more focused on the goals of the class and less redundant.

I did not compare the results of the suburban church participants and the transition ministry participants who finished the class and took the post-test because there were few differences in their relationships to God. Both groups were actively involved in Bible study, prayer, worship, and Christian fellowship. Both groups were stressed and depending on God for help. To preserve confidentiality, I did not designate participant group affiliation in Appendix E test answers. Also, the sample size was too small to be significant. Based on pre-tests, the most significant differences in relationship to God were between the eleven participants who finished the class and the sixteen who dropped out of the transition ministry program or the Bible study for various reasons. I was not able to teach classes during the Covid-19 pandemic.

My final conclusions on the thesis-project are shown in chapter five, which assesses the findings and draws out the implications of the thesis statement. Chapter five also offers recommendations for further study about what the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches on loving and forgiving ourselves and our enemies when life hurts.

CHAPTER FIVE

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

When I was asked to conduct a Bible study for a ministry that provides transitional housing and discipleship for Christian women coming out of abusive relationships or prison, I determined that the most useful study would explore what the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches on radically loving and forgiving ourselves and our enemies when life hurts. I taught the Bible study for the transitional housing ministry, for a group of suburban church members, and for a group of college-age students. Chapter five evaluates the findings from the thesis-project. It also offers recommendations for further study about what the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches on loving and forgiving ourselves and our enemies when life hurts.

Goals of the Thesis-Project

My goal was to encourage participants to know and love themselves as God knows and loves them, and to love and forgive themselves and others as Jesus Christ has loved and forgiven them. Many influences today encourage those who have been abused to see themselves as victims and to see those who hurt them as evil people worthy only of violent revenge. My goal was to help participants to value themselves as healers, called to use the love and wisdom they have gained from going through painful experiences to bring God's healing light and salt to others who are hurting. Jesus even calls us to pray that those who hurt us may come into a saving relationship with God and change their ways. Jesus also provides safe boundaries for being with those who hurt us. My thesis is that praying in a small group, studying, and meditating on the life and teachings of Jesus about loving and forgiving, and

encouraging each other to share God's love with others will lead to experiencing God's spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. God gives agency to victims and gives them healing work to do to help bring the kingdom of God on earth.

Evaluation of the Project

In the following sections I will evaluate the effectiveness of the Bible study class meetings, *Lectio Divina* scripture text discussions, handout material discussions, and pre-tests and post-tests.

Evaluation of Bible Study Class Meetings

To meet the spiritual, emotional, and social needs described in chapters two and three, I planned an eight-week Bible study. After teaching three pilot classes for different groups, I found that six elements were most helpful.[1]

First, each Bible study began with my checking in briefly with each participant and asking them a question related to the previous week's lesson theme. Including every participant in the initial discussion helped to form the group relationship. I asked participants to turn in their homework to ensure that they did it. I did not grade the homework; I read it and returned it the following week. Participants welcomed my positive comments on their thoughtful answers. In future classes I will consider reducing the number of homework questions from ten

1. See Appendixes B and C for class handouts.

to seven to focus on the most important points. I would eliminate question 3, combine questions 5 and 6, and combine questions 7 and 8.[2]

Second, at the beginning of the worship part of the Bible study, I distributed the class handouts and prayed. Then we sang a Taizé worship song to transition from the stresses of the day into a contemplative frame of mind. None of the participants knew the Taizé songs. Some said the songs were beautiful and soothing, while a few disliked the unfamiliar music and were restless. In the future, I may try other contemplative songs that participants are more familiar with, especially if group songbooks or hymnals are available.

Third, I asked three different people to read the scripture, following the *Lectio Divina* outline printed in the lesson. Each of the scriptures generated thoughtful discussions among the participants and successfully focused on the goals of the class. These details are provided in the section "Feedback from Class Discussions of Scripture Texts" below.

Fourth, as time allowed, we briefly read and discussed additional material in the lesson, including contemporary true stories of people who experienced pain and later found love and forgiveness. Participants easily related to the stories. They spoke of their own similar experiences and told how God had also helped them.

Fifth, we read and discussed the homework questions about the handout material to give participants a head-start on writing their answers. Participant responses to the homework questions helped them focus on who God is, how God is active in their lives, and how God's grace, truth, and forgiveness empower them to act in their own situations. The question asking, "What in these verses and stories is hard to understand or doesn't seem to make sense?" gave

2. See Appendix C for class handout homework questions.

them a crucial opportunity to ask questions and to correct misunderstandings. Often more explanation was needed for the meaning of theological words, for the culture of the Biblical world, and for the counter-cultural teachings of Jesus. For example, I explained the meanings of *meek*, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, and how the teaching of Jesus to love your enemies was new to Hebrew culture. In future updates of the handouts, these explanations can be added. The homework questions successfully focused attention on the spiritual goals of the class and prepared participants to give feedback on the final post-test.

Sixth, one of the participants prayed the scripture blessing prayer from the handout. I asked participants to pray the blessing prayer during the coming week for themselves, their loved ones, and a person who had hurt them. Participants told of answered prayers and blessings they had experienced from healed relationships. Praying blessings for others emphasized that God called the participants to be light and salt in the world and to be agents of reconciliation. They may have been victims in the past, but now Jesus calls them to love and forgive themselves and to use their painful experiences to help others find peace in God. We closed each meeting by praying for needs mentioned and by praying the Lord's Prayer together.

Praying blessing prayers for those who hurt us helps to form the heart of God in us, and I heard participants expressing new thoughts toward offenders. When participants brought up major hurts or violent abuse, I avoided any suggestion that participants should reconcile with an abuser. Deep wounds are seldom completely healed in an eight-week group study. God will heal those who have been severely hurt, in God's good time, when they are ready. If needed and appropriate, I followed up by meeting with some participants individually and encouraging them to access professional assistance that was available to them. In the class I sometimes

referred to my "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout on the boundaries Jesus advised for relating to those who hurt us.[3] I prepared this booklet with material from chapter two and distributed it during the week one class.

I was also aware that victims are tempted to mimic the behavior of their abusers by expressing hatred, contempt, or a desire to take revenge, as discussed in chapter three. When I saw this tendency, I attempted, in a gentle and non-judgmental way, to ask how the life and teachings of Jesus show how to respond to those who hurt us. In the future I would like to prepare a lesson on how Jesus fulfills the Torah law of blood-revenge and gives us justice, as discussed in chapter three. Because Jesus is our avenger of blood, our redeemer, and our priestly city of refuge, Christians have new boundaries with their enemies.

My conclusion is that each of these six elements successfully helped to meet the goals of the class and encouraged group members to participate fully.

Feedback from Pilot Classes

I conducted three pilot classes before developing the final class handout, and many participants asked good questions about the meaning of theological words and concepts. I switched to Bible translations that were easier for them to understand, and I added definitions for some unfamiliar words, such as *countenance*, *exalted*, and *bestowed*.

One person asked who I am considering an enemy, so I added a definition of *enemy*. Another person said she was her own worst enemy and that she struggled with self-acceptance. Her observation prompted me to begin the thesis-project class with scriptures on our personal

3. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

reconciliation with God and our need to forgive ourselves. I believe it is not possible to accept others until one has made one's own peace with God and accepted oneself.

Another person misunderstood "reconciliation with enemies" to mean "submission to enemies." So I defined *reconciliation* as helping "two people or groups to become friendly again" by "finding a way to make two different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time."[4] Unlike *submission* or *surrender*, *reconciliation* respects the ideas and facts of both parties and seeks to help them understand each other and become friendly again. This view of reconciliation and love for enemies presupposes that we understand the "unconquerable benevolence" of God, which is more difficult for those who have been abused or abandoned by parents, spouses, partners, or authorities.[5]

One scripture that especially surprised pilot class participants was Jesus's clear and uncompromising statement that God requires us to forgive: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15). This scripture provoked a lively discussion of the difference between being a Christian forgiver and being a "doormat" who tolerates and enables abusive behavior. This discussion led me to include the section on "Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" in chapters two and three and to distribute this material to classes as a booklet.[6] It also prompted me to include the section on

4. "Reconciliation," Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary, accessed May 17, 2021, https://learnersdictionary.com/definition/reconciliation.

5. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 50. Regarding the spiritual gift of love in Galatians 5:22 and God's unconquerable benevolence.

6. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

"The Hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," which includes Biblical stories of God transforming violent, hurtful people into people who became a blessing to others, such as the Apostle Paul. God forgives in order to redeem and transform us, giving us new peace and hope. God forgives us so that we can change and become a blessing to God's people, as we were created to be. If possible, these additional topics should be taught in a follow-up class.

Feedback from Class Discussions of Scripture Texts

The most challenging part of developing the lessons was selecting scripture texts for the *Lectio Divina* readings. Knowing that many participants struggled with self-acceptance, I began the first class with the Genesis 1 account of God creating male and female in the image of God and God saying they were very good. Participants commented on God's pride in his creation, including his pride in creating male and female people, and said it made them feel loved. One person said that God "created us perfect and beautiful."[7] Others noticed that God gave us authority to care for creation, blessed us, and provided everything we needed. We then read the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-11), which set the theme of each week's class. My goal was to give participants a self-image based on God's fatherly and motherly love, rather than only sin and shame, and to give them hope for the future. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved.

In week two, we read Genesis 3:1-15, the story of how the serpent deceived and tempted Adam and Eve, how they sinned, and how God spoke the first prophecy of a Messiah Redeemer who would save humanity from their sin. Participants related to the Genesis story

7. Participant H, January 8, 2019, class discussion.

and had valuable insights about how Adam and Eve were innocent and happy until the jealous serpent undermined their intimate relationship with God. The serpent taught them to distrust God. Participants discussed how others had tempted them in similar ways to separate them from God. We then read Luke 1:35, Galatians 4:4-6, and 1 John 1:7-9 to emphasize the good news that Jesus fulfilled the Genesis 3:15 prophecy of a Messiah. My goal was to help participants understand that when we are tempted into sin, God wants to help us repent, save us, redeem us, and restore the intimate relationship he desires to have with us. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved.

In the future I will include and discuss a definition of what forgiveness means and why God forgives because in pre-test question 17 one-third of the participants said they had learned "nothing" or "not much" about loving and forgiving when life hurts. Also, many participants gave vague answers to post-test questions 18 and 19 about what forgiveness means and about the difference between forgiving and excusing.

In week three, the theme was set by the Matthew 5:5-6 Beatitudes. We read Philippians 2:4-13 about Jesus trusting and following God even to the point of death on a cross. Participants commented that death on a cross was a horrible way to die, that the sacrifice Jesus made was hard to imagine, and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit bring us hope, joy, and love. Women living in the transitional shelter noticed Paul's emphasis on knowing and respecting other people's boundaries and "staying in your own lane."[8] My goal was to help participants find hope in Jesus, who trusted and followed God through persecutions and was honored and

8. Participant O, June 11, 2020, class discussion.

rewarded for his obedience. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved. In the future, this week would be a good time to re-examine the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout and to discuss the boundaries Jesus advised.[9]

In week four, the theme was mercy and the *Lectio Divina* reading was the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Participants commented that the "despised Samaritan" had empathy for another despised person, who was beaten, stripped, robbed, and excluded by others. One noticed that the Samaritan went above and beyond what was customary and even walked while the wounded man rode his donkey. Participants all related to the story and said those who did not help the wounded man had no excuse; actions were more important than prestigious positions. One participant, noting that Jesus said, "Do the same," defined *mercy* as, "Do for others even if they don't do for you."[10] One commented on the effective teaching technique Jesus used in the parable by asking the lawyer to draw the conclusion himself. The contemporary story of the Nickel Mines Amish school shooter and his widow prompted much discussion about harboring bitterness and anger. Participants commented that the shooter's unforgiveness was like a poison. One said, "I don't want to go down that road. He let it fester, and it became demonic possession."[11] They praised the shooter's widow for not taking on his guilt and bitterness, saying she had the love of Jesus, she had a heart like God, and she forgave like God did. My goal was to show that Jesus challenged traditional views of how to love and

9. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

10. Participant H, February 5, 2019, class discussion.

11. Participant K, October 18, 2018, class discussion.

show mercy to our neighbors, even to our enemies. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved.

In week five, the theme was peacemaking and the *Lectio Divina* reading was the story of a forgiving, generous king and an unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-34). Participants said that the unforgiving servant was greedy, selfish, and uncomprehending of the mercy shown to him. He could have paid the mercy forward, but he misused his power. One said, "You have to learn to extend the gift of grace to others."[12] Another said, "If people need money, just give it to them and don't expect it back. Money's not as important as helping people."[13] Participants stated that if you don't forgive, God won't forgive you, and when you do wrong, it will come back to hurt you. One said, "God is not a pushover—he holds us accountable and has boundaries."[14] One wondered why the king let the servant run up such a big debt, and another wondered how much we owe God. My goal was to show that God expects us to have mercy on others just as he has mercy on us. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved.

In week six, the theme was persecution, and the *Lectio Divina* reading was the teaching of Jesus to love your enemies, to pray for those who abuse you, and, like God, to be kind to the ungrateful and the evil (Luke 6:20-38). Participants commented that we have all done many hurtful things to God, and Jesus showed us love first. We should give to others the love God has given us. We need be humble and be kind to our enemies as God is kind. We also need to forgive ourselves. We are secure because God blesses us. My goal was to show that God sees

12. Participant G, February 19, 2019, class discussion.

13. Participant K, July 2, 2020, class discussion.

14. Participant A, December 19, 2018, class discussion.

and blesses those who are persecuted on his account, and he asks us to love our enemies as he does. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved. In the future, week six would be a good time to review the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout and to discuss the boundaries Jesus advised for relating to those who hurt us.[15] As one participant said, "'What happens in the house stays in the house' protects the abuser, not the child."[16] Jesus set healthy boundaries for being near abusers.

In week seven, the theme was "You are the salt of the earth, … the light of the world," and the *Lectio Divina* reading was Matthew 5:13-16 (salt and light) and 2 Corinthians 4:5-7 (the power belongs to God and not to us). To me, this was the high point of the class, encouraging participants to see themselves as a God-ordained healer instead of only a victim. Participants commented that it gave them joy and happiness to see the brightness of God shining out of them, to go and share what they have with others, to bring others to Christ, to lift people up, to do what God wants us to do through the power of his love, and to bring glory to God. One described how her light was shining: "a flicker here and there."[17] Participants saw these blessings as a gift of God and said that the treasure in jars of clay was the knowledge of God. My goal was for participants to understand their calling to be "the light of the world" and to bring glory to God. Based on discussion feedback, I believe the goal was achieved.

In week eight, the *Lectio Divina* reading was Matthew 5:1-16—the Beatitudes and "you are the salt and the light." Participants spoke of all the ways God had blessed them, such as,

15. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

16. Participant G, February 26, 2018, class discussion.

17. Participant C, February 6, 2019, class discussion.

"The strength to get through my life and know he has a plan for me."[18] Others spoke of feeling safe, feeling comforted, feeling loved, receiving mercy and rewards in heaven, letting their light shine, following God's ways not their ways, and loving and forgiving others to glorify God. Some mentioned the joy of having something to share and of helping others to love and forgive. One said that peacemaking involves "family forgiveness."[19] Another said, "Those who do what God requires will be persecuted."[20] My goal was to sum up the class: following God requires obedient loving and forgiving, will provoke persecution, and brings great love and blessings. We are called to participate with God in the ministry of reconciliation by using the wisdom gained from our painful experiences to help others. Based on discussion feedback, I believe this goal was achieved.

Feedback from Discussions with Participants

The most significant feedback consisted of reports that participants had reconciled with alienated mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons. These reconciliations could have resulted from knowing that they themselves were securely loved by God, from learning how their relatives are loved by God, from praying blessing prayers for relatives, from learning that Jesus expects us to love and forgive even our enemies, from learning that Jesus will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive the sins of others, and/or from seeing good examples of forgiveness in the class handouts and participants. I did not ask or suggest that participants

18. Participant H, February 22, 2019, class discussion.

19. Participant A, June 5, 2019, class discussion.

20. Participant D, May 29, 2019, class discussion.

reconcile with violently abusive former partners; however, several did return to them as often happens in shelters. I pray that those participants now have a closer relationship to God and will look to him for guidance and protection. In future classes I will discuss the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout on the first day, so it is available to those who might drop out and return to abusive relationships.[21]

I printed all the scripture blessing prayers in a small booklet for class participants and hoped to hear feedback about positive changes resulting from praying daily blessing prayers for difficult people. I believe the scriptures were helpful; however, I did not hear any specific feedback that the blessing prayers were more helpful than other scriptures.

Participants commented that the *Lectio Divina* method of reading scripture three times helped them to understand the scriptures in a deeper way. At first, many thought that reading the same scripture three times was unnecessarily repetitive; they were surprised by new insights that arose on the second and third reading. Most participants learned to keep listening to the Holy Spirit for new understandings, though a few tuned out after one reading.

Feedback from Class Pre-tests and Post-tests

My thesis is that meeting in a small Bible study group to pray, worship, and meditate on scriptures and stories about loving and forgiving will lead to a closer relationship with the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who is transcendent, incarnate, and immanent in our lives. Jesus brings freedom from the dark clouds of fear and anger that often block the light of God. He brings inner peace and new life through the Holy Spirit and heals the hurts from painful

21. See Appendix G for the "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies" handout booklet.

relationships. To test this thesis, I gave participants a pre-test at the beginning of the first class and a post-test at the end of the last class, showing the outcomes that participants experienced.

The results of the six seven-point Likert scale questions recorded in chapter four asked participants to express how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about God, love, and forgiveness. All the eleven participants who finished the full eight-week "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" class self-identified as Christians and were actively involved in worship, prayer, and Bible studies. Perhaps this is why their pre-test and post-test answers did not show statistically significant differences. The feedback from the six Likert scale questions was easy to quantify and graph but was of limited value in understanding the effectiveness of the class because of the small sample size and the participants' previous Christian experience.

The results of the fourteen short-answer questions were more revealing. The responses recorded in chapter four showed more awareness of God's love and forgiveness: his expectation that we love and forgive each other, his help given through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and his blessings when we obey and follow his ways. Based on post-test feedback, I believe that those who completed the eight-week "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" class did have a closer relationship with the Triune God. My thesis-project laid a good foundation, but I did not expect to heal deep spiritual wounds completely in an eight-week group study, especially in participants who were deceived and sexually abused when they were children.

Many deep hurts and challenges remained, as shown in the answers to Question 20, "What is your greatest challenge in healing relationships after trouble or a conflict?" Participants mentioned important challenges that could be covered in follow-up classes:

forgiving myself and others; overcoming guilt and shame; overcoming cultural traditions of judging, criticizing, and revenge; dealing with pride and anger; letting go instead of replaying the hurt over and over; forgiving instead of excusing; finding better ways of dealing with conflict; creating healthy boundaries; forgiving without enabling abusive behavior; rebuilding trust; rebuilding broken relationships; learning how to bless those who persecute you; learning how to let your light shine; and keeping your joy in God. One participant mentioned, "Facing the pain I caused without excuses, not letting my guilty conscience beat me up for being the source of hurt. Trust is the biggest hurdle when someone hurts me."[22] Another mentioned, "Feeling again. I don't get attached easily, so if someone is close enough to hurt me, I turn off all emotions for them, I excuse it and not forgive. And in turn, it's hard to feel things for them again."[23] Follow-up classes could use the same overall structure with relevant *Lectio Divina* scriptures selected for each issue. Other Biblical teaching resources could also be evaluated and selected to address these needs.

Conclusions

Developing Leadership

In follow-up classes, participants will be encouraged to take leadership roles, such as leading the *Lectio Divina*, singing, or leading prayer for others. Participants will also be encouraged to see themselves as called by God to use the love and wisdom they have gained from going through painful experiences to bring healing light and salt to others who are

22. Participant E, Question 20 Post-test Response, February 2019.

23. Participant Q, Question 20 Pre-test Response, October 2018.

hurting. They are called to participate in God's mission: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10, KJV). Jesus suffered and died to give his people hope and eternal life. His suffering gives our suffering a new perspective, for by his wounds we are healed (Isa 53:5, NIV). Jesus calls his followers to turn from bitterness and revenge to helping and healing others, giving participants a new sense of agency and purpose. When believers pray for holy wisdom, the power of the Holy Spirit is able to work through them to carry out the ministry of God.

The most significant idea presented in the study about loving your enemies is that God forgives in order to redeem and transform us. God does not need to approach hostile people with the goal of self-protection as we often do; Jesus demonstrated his lack of fear as he went to the cross. God is confident that our enemies can be changed if they will repent and seek the relationship they were created to have with God, as Paul did. If class participants are willing to cooperate with Jesus, he may call them to participate in the redemption and transformation of their enemies, as he called Ananias and Barnabas to help Paul after he repented (Acts 9).

One of the traits I love most about our Lord is his power to see the image of God in each person and persistently to call each of us to choose life in harmony with the Trinity. God promised he would never abandon his followers. No matter how many times people sin and ask for forgiveness, God successfully copes with those who ask for his help. I hope participants will approach themselves and their enemies with the same faith, hope, and love that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit demonstrate for them.

Use of These Materials in Different Contexts

Although the study was developed for women in the transitional housing ministry, Jesus usually taught in groups including both men and women and his teachings are equally relevant to men and women. I also taught the class for college students and a suburban family group. Both groups included men who participated actively and related to the challenges of loving and forgiving when life hurts. If the class were taught for a group including men, it would be helpful to include more contemporary stories of men facing and overcoming these challenges. In my handouts, most of the Biblical stories are about men and most of the contemporary stories are about women.

If the study were used with non-Christians, much more context would need to be provided. The lessons were developed for women who identified as Christians and were actively participating in a regular program of Bible study, prayer, worship, professional counseling, and Christian fellowship. Non-Christians have many challenges of loving and forgiving when life hurts and would almost certainly be interested in a group study on this subject. The class could be modified to meet their needs by adding additional materials, such as how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and how to be forgiven of sins.

Personal Impact

When beginning the Spiritual Formation for Ministry Leaders D.Min. program, I was recovering from three very painful relationship experiences. One of my motivations in developing the “Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts” class was to find help for my own hurts

and to make that help available to others who are hurting. Because of the spiritual formation I experienced during the D.Min. program and the reading and research I did developing the thesis-project, my understanding of these painful experiences has changed.

I am now more able to see my experiences through God's eyes, to see myself through God's eyes, and, most helpfully, to see those who hurt me through God's eyes. Instead of only nursing my own wounds, I can obey and follow God to grow into the image of Christ. Instead of grieving over the past, I see how Jesus loves me and gives me hope for a new life serving in His name to heal others. God has enabled significant healing for three of my broken relationships, and I feel a new peace and hope for the future. I hope that each of those who participate in the "Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts" classes will also find a new peace and hope for their future lives—redeemed, forgiven, and loved by God. I hope they will be blessed and will bless others, bringing glory to God.

APPENDIX A

CLASS LESSON PLANS FOR EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

- **Week One** - Introduction to the group process and Pre-test – 90 min. meeting
  - 5 min. – Prayer; introduction to the study; ethical and confidentiality information; establish a safe environment: "God accepts me as I am and still gently invites me to grow."
  - 15 min. – Participants introduce themselves to each other; each are invited to say how Jesus has loved them differently than the way they loved themselves.

    Jesus in John 15:11-12 ESV: These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. "**This is my commandment, that you love one another <u>as I have loved you</u>**.
  - 25 min. – Pre-test
  - 5 min. – Meditative Music to invite participants into a quiet space

    Taizé Music: In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful (see Appendix B for Handouts)
  - 20 min. – Introduction to prayerfully reading scripture with *Lectio Divina* of Gen 1:26-31 – "Created Very Good in the Image of God, and Blessed."

    ***Lectio Divina* – Reading of the Living Word**

    Become attentive. Let go of distractions. Be present to God, in Christ.

    First reading: Head

    What does the Holy Spirit draw your attention to- what word or phrase resonates? Notice it, and pray it back to God.

    Second reading: Heart

    What is going on inside you as you sit with whatever you noticed? What are you *feeling* as the Holy Spirit stirs God's word deep into your soul? Notice it, and talk with God about it.

    Third reading: Habit (*from Latin "habitus", character*)

    How might whatever you're noticing reflect what the Holy Spirit is praying in you and for you?
    What is God calling you to, in being or in doing?

    Rest.

    Rest in God's arms, "like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2), enjoying his loving embrace.

    (Lectio Divina developed for the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
    c 2005 Susan Porterfield Currie, used by permission)
  - 15 min. – **Teaching on Discernment**

- How can you know if the thoughts that come to you in prayer are from God or from another source? (*example: Jephthah's vow and sacrifice of his daughter, Judg 11:29-40*)
- Thoughts come: from the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit; from memorized scriptures; from our own desires; from books/news/social media/TV/ movies/video games; from customs of your church and political culture; from childhood memories; from internalized family expectations or influences; from peer pressures; from reactions to medications/psychoactive drugs/alcohol; from exposure to trauma or occult influences; from ancestral sins/oaths/curses; and from spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:12)
- To test your thoughts: pray and ask God for wisdom; never make a doctrine out of a few verses; test the thought into the life and teachings of Jesus Christ in scripture; test the thought into the advice and wisdom of godly people whose love for you can be trusted; consider whether your thoughts are from the Holy Spirit's fruit of love, joy, and peace; consider the consequences for you and for the next seven generations; pray and ask God for wisdom again, and don't make a hasty decision before you feel peace with God in your spirit. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).
- Prayerfully treasure up and ponder thoughts and wisdom from God. Release any other thoughts and send them away. "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

o 5 min. – Teaching on Everyday Spirituality, review homework on pages two and three of Class Handout

- Pray without ceasing in all of your life, for God loves and works through even the parts that seem mundane, frustrating, or boringly repetitive.
- Example: Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

o 5 min. – Closing Prayer, Lord's Prayer, Blessing Prayer: The LORD spoke to Moses, …
"Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,
The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Num 6:24-26)

(Encourage participants to memorize this blessing prayer and pray it for others.)

- **Week Two**- Discussion of scriptures on sin and forgiveness – 90 min. meeting
  - o 5 min. - Begin with prayer
  - o 20 min. – Invite each person to share from prayer, journaling, or learnings in the previous week.
  - o 5 min. – Meditative Music to invite participants into a quiet space (see Appendix B for Handouts)

    Taizé Music: My Soul is At Rest, in God alone, my Salvation comes from God
  - o 30 min. – Read and discuss Gen 3:1-15, "The Serpent Deceives and Grieves," which establishes the reality of sin that tempts us to fear God and hide from God. Also read and discuss Luke 1:35 and Gal 4:4-6, which speak of how the prophecy of a Messiah Redeemer in Gen 3:15 was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who God sent to redeem us and adopt us as God's children.
    Be sure each participant knows and feels that God wants to forgive us and redeem us after we

sin and repent. Be aware that a discussion of Adam and Eve's sin could trigger a strong emotional response, especially in those who were deceived and sinned against when they were children. Be prepared to compassionately receive this response and to possibly refer someone for individual counseling according to appropriate professional ethical practices.

- 10 min. – Discuss homework for the coming week: individual prayer, meditation, discernment, journaling, and learning at home
  - Meditate each day at home on the week's scripture reading and additional related scriptures, quotes, and stories printed on the handout for the week. (see Appendix B for Handouts)
  - Pray for one specific person who is difficult for you to get along with, using scriptures and blessing prayers.
  - Keep a guided journal for writing, drawing, or collecting your favorite images, scripture, or quotes.
  - Prayerfully play back the "recorded tapes" from memories of your youth and family life.
  - Practice discernment to test your thoughts. Prayerfully treasure up and ponder the godly thoughts. Release any other thoughts and send them away.
- 15 min. – Prayer for each other
- 5 min. - Closing Prayer, Lord's Prayer, Blessing Prayer (see Appendix B for Blessing Prayers from scripture printed on each week's Handout)

- **Weeks Three-Seven** - 90-minute group study of scriptures on loving and forgiving when life hurts, focusing on Matt 5-7—the Sermon on the Mount and Luke 6:17–49 the Sermon on the Plain. These scriptures are life-changing and cathartic ("purifying, cleansing, liberating, releasing, intense")
  - 5 min. - Begin with prayer
  - 20 min. – Invite each person to share from prayer, journaling, or learnings in the previous week
  - 5 min. – Meditative Music to invite participants into a quiet space

    Taizé Music: (see Appendix B for lyrics printed on each week's Handout)

    Week 3. Bless the Lord, My Soul, and bless God's Holy name

    Week 4. God Is Forgiveness – dare to forgive and God will be with you, love and do not fear

    Week 5. The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace – and joy in the Holy Spirit

    Week 6. Within Our Darkest Night, you kindle the fire that never dies away

    Week 7. With You, O Lord, Is Life in All Its Fullness, in your light we shall see true light
  - 30 min. – *Lectio Divina* based on readings from Matt 5:1-16, bringing hope and light, using the outline introduced in week one.

    Week Three, Blessed are the meek, those who hunger for righteousness – Matt 5:5-6

    Prayerfully Reading Scripture: Jesus Listened to God and Followed God. – Phil 2:4-13

    Week Four, Blessed are the merciful and pure in heart - Matt 5:7-8

    Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37

Week Five, Blessed are the peacemakers, children of God - Matt 5:9

Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Parable of the Forgiving, Generous King and the Unforgiving Servant – Matt 18:21-34

Week Six, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake - Matt 5:10-12

Prayerfully Reading Scripture: Blessings and Woes, Love for Enemies – Luke 6:22-38 (from the Sermon on the Plain)

Week Seven, You are salt of the earth and light of the world - Matt 5:13-16

Prayerfully Reading Scripture: You are salt of the earth and light of the world – Matt 5:13-16

- 10 min. – Discuss homework for the coming week: individual prayer, meditation, discernment, journaling, and learning at home
  - Meditate each day at home on the week's scripture reading and additional related scriptures printed on the handout for the week. (see Appendix B for Handouts)
  - Pray for one specific person who is difficult for you to get along with, using scriptures and blessing prayers.
  - Keep a guided journal for writing, drawing, or collecting your favorite images, scripture or quotes.
  - Prayerfully play back the "recorded tapes" from memories of your youth and family life.
  - Practice discernment to test your thoughts. Prayerfully treasure up and ponder the godly thoughts. Release any other thoughts and send them away.
- 15 min. – Prayer for each other
- 5 min. - Closing Prayer, Lord's Prayer, Blessing Prayer (see Appendix B for Blessing Prayers from scripture printed on each week's Handout)

- **Week Eight** – Summary of the Process and Post-test – 90 min.
  - 5 min. - Begin with prayer
  - 20 min. – Invite each person to share from prayer, journaling, or learnings in the previous week.
  - 5 min. – Meditative Music, reading Matt 5:1-16

    Taizé Music – The Lord Is My Light, my light and salvation, in God I trust
  - 15 min. – Discussion on prayer, journaling, and learning experiences during the class
  - 15 min. – Discussion on outcome of prayer for one specific person who is difficult for you to get along with (persons are free to *not* share)
  - 25 min. – Post-test
  - 5 min. – Closing Prayer, Lord's Prayer, Blessing Prayer
    2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 ESV
    To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, [12] so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- **Follow-up** – Group Leader will follow-up individually or in small focus groups on outcomes of prayer, journaling, and learning experiences. Participants are free to *not* share. I will be aware that a discussion of sin and the "love your enemies" texts could trigger a strong emotional response, especially in those who were deceived and sinned against when they were children.
  I will be prepared to compassionately receive this response and to possibly refer someone for individual counseling according to appropriate professional ethical practices.

APPENDIX B

CLASS HANDOUTS FOR EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts

Thorns and Roses

For the LORD comforts Zion;
he comforts all her waste places and
makes her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.
Isaiah 51:3 ESV

Barbara Gail Simons
Spiritual Director

Loving and Forgiving When Life Hurts – Class Handouts

Week One – Introduction and Pre-test – God's Unfailing Grace and Truth – Matt. 5:1-11 & Gen. 1:26-31

Taizé Music: In the Lord I'll be ever thankful, I will rejoice, look to God, do not be afraid
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: Created Very Good in the Image of God – Gen. 1:26-31
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – Beatitudes, Matt. 5:1-11, Kingdom of Heaven/God
Blessing Prayer – Numbers 6:22-26 [ESV] bless you, keep you, shine upon you, give you peace

Week Two – Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn, Matt. 5:3-4

Taizé Music: My soul is at rest, in God alone, my salvation comes from God
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Serpent Deceives and Grieves – Gen. 3:1-15
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – God Forgives and Redeems
Blessing Prayer – Colossians 1:9-14 [ESV] He has delivered us from darkness to redemption

Week Three – Blessed are the meek and those who hunger for righteousness, Matt. 5:5-6

Taizé Music: Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God's holy name, who leads me into life
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: Jesus Listened to and Followed the Triune God, Phil 2:4-13
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – The Meek Shall Inherit the Land, Psalm 23
Blessing Prayer – Ephesians 1:15-23 [ESV] give you the Spirit of wisdom, hope, power

Week Four – Blessed are the merciful and pure in heart, Matt. 5:7-8

Taizé Music: God Is Forgiveness, dare to forgive, God will be with you, love and do not fear
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – widow's story, Jesus: "Father, forgive them"
Blessing Prayer – Philippians 1:6, 9-11 [ESV] that your love may abound, be pure

Week Five – Blessed are the peacemakers, children of God, Matt. 5:9

Taizé Music: The Kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Merciful King and Unforgiving Servant – Matt. 18:21-34
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – Peaceable Kingdom, forgiveness, overcome with good
Blessing Prayer –1 Thess. 3:9-13 [NLT] make your love for all grow and overflow, hearts strong

Week Six – Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, Matt. 5:10-12

Taizé Music: Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: Blessings and Woes, Love for Enemies – Luke 6:22-38
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – God rescues, Rev. Thompson is freed by forgiving
Blessing Prayer – Ephesians 6:10-18 [ESV] – be strong, take up the whole armor of God

Week Seven – You are salt of the earth and light of the world – Matthew 5:13-16

Taizé Music: With you, O Lord, is life in all its fullness, in your light we shall see true light
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: You are salt of the earth and light of the world – Matt. 5:13-16
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – Jesus calls and commissions, Amy Barnes story
Blessing Prayer – Ephesians 3:14-21 [ESV] strengthened, rooted and grounded in love

Week Eight – The Beatitudes, Salt and Light – Matthew 5:1-16, **Summary and Post-test**

Taizé Music: The Lord is my light, my light and salvation, in God I trust
Prayerfully Reading Scripture: The Beatitudes, Salt and Light – Matthew 5:1-16 [ESV]
For Prayer and Meditation at Home – God calls us to the ministry of love and reconciliation
Blessing Prayer – 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 [ESV] that the name of Jesus may be glorified in you

Week One - God's Unfailing Grace and Truth Genesis 1:26-31 & Matthew 5:1-11 ESV

Introduction and Pre-Test

In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful
music: Jacques Berthier, 1991,
© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé,
71250 Taizé, France
www.taize.fr/en

In the Lord I'll be ever thankful, *Phil. 4:4-6*
In the Lord I will rejoice.
Look to God, do not be afraid,
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near;
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture

Created Very Good in the Image of God, and Blessed – Gen. 1:26-31 ESV

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."
27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."
29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.
31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Lectio Divina – Reading of the Living Word

Become attentive. Let go of distractions. Be present to God, in Christ.

First reading: Head
What does the Holy Spirit draw your attention to- what word or phrase resonates?
Notice it, and pray it back to God.

Second reading: Heart
What is going on inside you as you sit with whatever you noticed? What are you *feeling* as the Holy Spirit stirs God's word deep into your soul? Notice it, and talk with God about it.

Third reading: Habit (*from Latin "habitus", character*)
How might whatever you're noticing reflect what the Holy Spirit is praying in you and for you?
What is God calling you to, in being or in doing?

Rest.
Rest in God's arms, "like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2), enjoying his loving embrace.

(Lectio Divina developed for the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
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Week One **The Beatitudes of Jesus, from the Sermon on the Mount** **Matthew 5:1-11** ESV
Introduction and Pre-test

For Prayer and Meditation at Home – God's Unfailing Grace and Truth

Jesus: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10 ESV)

Jesus: Blessings in the Beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5:1-11 ESV

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to
him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. *(v. 9 is KJV)*
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against
you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so
they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Paul: You Are All One in Christ Jesus – Galatians 3:27-28 ESV

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

1 John 3:1-2 ESV See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that **when he appears we shall be like him**, because we shall see him as he is.

Our need to be loved, guided, and accepted can only be met completely by our Triune God—Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit—who created us, who guides us as a holy father and mother would love their child, and who promises eternal life to those who repent and turn to God in faith. God's *agape* love is described by William Barclay as "***unconquerable benevolence***. It means that no matter what people may do to us by way of insult or injury or humiliation we will never seek anything else but their **highest good**."

This holy love, which never ends, transforms the lives of those who experience it. God's "unconquerable benevolence" has the power to comfort us, to heal us, and to bring us into the joy and peace of the Kingdom of Heaven.

quote: William Barclay, The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians. The Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, 50 (regarding Galatians 5:22).

Blessing Prayer – Numbers 6:22-26 ESV

The LORD spoke to Moses, … "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,
The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance* upon you and give you peace." **countenance: face*

Matthew 5:3 and 5:10: "… for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"

(called **The Kingdom of God** in Matt. 6:33, Mark 10:14, Luke 6:20, Luke 17:21, John 3:5, Romans 14:17, etc.)

Jesus: The Kingdom of God is within you and in the midst of you – Luke 17:20-21 NKJV

Now when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the **kingdom of God** would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, `See here!' or `See there!' For indeed, **the kingdom of God is within you**."

(**Luke 17:21** ESV "behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you")

Paul: The Triune God—Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit—is transcendent (over all), incarnate (embodied in flesh) and immanent (in all)

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **one God and Father of all**, who is **over all** and **through all** and **in all**. - **Ephesians 4:4-6** ESV

Paul: The Triune God — Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit — be with you - 2 Corinthians 13:14 ESV

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

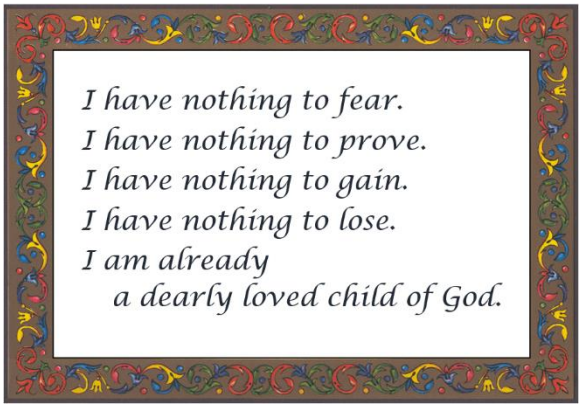
Peter: God has granted to us to become partakers of the divine nature - 2 Peter 1:1-4 ESV

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a **faith** of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: May **grace and peace** be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to **life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which **he has granted to us his precious and very great promises**, so that through them **you may become partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Jesus: Go and make disciples of all nations in the name of the Triune God – Matthew 28:18-20 ESV

And Jesus came and said to them, "All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. And **behold, I am with you always**, to the end of the age."


I have nothing to fear.
I have nothing to prove.
I have nothing to gain.
I have nothing to lose.
I am already
a dearly loved child of God.

"All sin comes from the failure to love as God loves." ~ author unknown

Jesus never failed to love anyone with grace and truth; he never sinned.

Week Two – [3] **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**
[4] **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.** **Matt. 5:3-4** ESV

My Soul Is at Rest
music: Jacques Berthier
© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France

My soul is at rest, in God alone. *Psalm 62*
My salvation comes from God.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture – The Serpent Deceives and God Redeems – Gen. 3:1-15 ESV

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "**Did God actually say**, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

[2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

[4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

[6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

[8] And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

[9] But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

[10] And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

[11] He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" [12] The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

[13] Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

[14] The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. [15] I will put hostility* between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; her offspring* shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (*Note: This is the first prophecy of the Messiah Redeemer.*) **NET trans.*

God sent his Son, the offspring of a woman, as prophets foretold – Luke 1:35 ESV
And the angel answered Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.

God sent his Son, born of a woman – Galatians 4:4-6 NRSV But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

→ (a *dead snake is often under Mary's feet*)

Week Two – [3] **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**
[4] **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.** **Matt. 5:3-4** ESV

For Prayer and Meditation at Home – The Serpent Deceives and God Forgives and Redeems

Jesus: The Spirit of the Lord anointed me to proclaim good news – Luke 4:18-19 ESV
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

God Cleanses Us – 1 John 1:7, 9 ESV But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. … **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**.

David: Have mercy and create in me a clean heart, O God – Psalm 51:1-14 NRSV *A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan exposed him for getting Bathsheba pregnant and having her husband killed*
Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. …
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

David: Bless the Lord, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases – Psalm 103:1-5 ESV
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Regina Brett: "God loves you because of who God is, not because of anything you did or didn't do."
– from newspaper column "45 Life Lessons and 5 to Grow On," *The Plain Dealer*, May 28, 2006

John: God's Perfect Love Casts Out Fear – 1 John 4:10, 18-19 NCV This is what **real love** is: It is not our love for God; it is **God's love for us**. He sent his Son to die in our place to take away our sins. … **Where God's love is, there is no fear, because God's perfect love drives out fear.** It is punishment that makes a person fear. … **We love because God first loved us.**

C.S. Lewis: "The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us."

Blessing Prayer – Colossians 1:9-14 ESV
And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, [10] so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; [11] being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; [12] giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.
[13] He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14] in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Week Three – **[5] "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.**
[6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied. **Matt. 5:5-6** ESV

Bless the Lord, My Soul
words: Robert Batastini
composer: Jacques Berthier

Bless the Lord, my soul,
And bless God's holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul,
Who leads me into life.

from Psalm 103
© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France

Prayerfully Reading Scripture – Phillipians 2:4-13 ESV *Lectio Divina*

Paul: Jesus Trusted, Listened to, and Followed the Triune God

[4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.
[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in **Christ Jesus**, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
[9] Therefore God has highly exalted* him and bestowed* on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
[12] Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**exalted: raised to the place of highest honor* **bestowed on: gave*

Lectio Divina – Reading of the Living Word

Become attentive. Let go of distractions. Be present to God, in Christ.

First reading: Head
What does the Holy Spirit draw your attention to- what word or phrase resonates?
Notice it, and pray it back to God.

Second reading: Heart
What is going on inside you as you sit with whatever you noticed? What are you *feeling* as the Holy Spirit stirs God's word deep into your soul? Notice it, and talk with God about it.

Third reading: Habit (*from Latin "habitus", character*)
How might whatever you're noticing reflect what the Holy Spirit is praying in you and for you?
What is God calling you to, in being or in doing?

Rest.
Rest in God's arms, "like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2), enjoying his loving embrace.

(Lectio Divina developed for the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
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Week Three – [5] **"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.**
[6] **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,**
for they shall be satisfied. **Matt. 5:5-6** ESV

For Prayer and Meditation at Home

"**The reward for humility and fear of the L**ORD **is riches and honor and life**." **– Proverbs 22:4** ESV

The Lord will bring forth your righteousness and your justice – Psalm 37:3-11 ESV *A Psalm of David*

Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD**, and he will give you the desires of your heart**.
Commit your way to the LORD; **trust in him, and he will act**.
He will bring forth your **righteousness** as the light, and your **justice** as the noonday.
Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; **fret not yourself** over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!
Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! **Fret not yourself** … **those who wait for the L**ORD **shall inherit the land**. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more …
But **the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace**.

Connect with God – Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Light*, Ballantine Books, N.Y., 1972 (first ed. 1947)

Tune your thoughts to the thoughts of Jesus, that most loving Son of Man, for you were redeemed with the precious blood of the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You will know by the stirrings of **hope** within your mind that He is there.
"Heavenly Father, please increase in me at this time your life-giving power, in the name of Jesus Christ. … **Thank you that your life is now coming into me and increasing life in my spirit and in my mind and in my body."** (from p. 28-29)

The Lord is My Shepherd – Psalm 23 NKJV *A Psalm of David*

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters. **He restores my soul**; He leads me in the paths of **righteousness** For His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, **I will fear no evil**; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over. Surely **goodness and mercy** shall follow me All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

Blessing Prayer – Ephesians 1:15-23 NCV

That is why since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you. I always remember you in my prayers, asking the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you will know him better.

I pray also that you will have greater understanding in your heart so you will know the hope to which he has called us and that you will know how rich and glorious are the blessings God has promised his holy people. And you will know that God's power is very great for us who believe. That power is the same as the great strength God used to raise Christ from the dead and put him at his right side in the heavenly world.

God has put Christ over all rulers, authorities, powers, and kings, not only in this world but also in the next. God put everything under his power and made him the head over everything for the church, which is Christ's body. The church is filled with Christ, and Christ fills everything in every way.

Week Four – **[7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**
[8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. **Matt. 5:7-8** ESV

God Is Forgiveness — *Matthew 6:12-15*

music: Jacques Berthier
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71250 Taizé, France, 2007, 2011

God is Forgiveness.
Dare to forgive and God will be with you.
God is forgiveness.
Love and do not fear.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture – The Parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37 NLT *Lectio Divina*

Note: after several civil wars, the Samaritans and the Jews were political and religious enemies

[25] One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

[26] Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

[27] The man answered, "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

[28] "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

[29] The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

[30] Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

[31] "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. [32] A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

[33] "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. [34] Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. [35] The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

[36] "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

[37] The man replied, "The one who showed him **mercy**."

Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

Lectio Divina – Reading of the Living Word

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Week Four – [7] **"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**
[8] **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.** **Matt. 5:7-8** ESV

For Prayer and Meditation at Home

Amish school shooter's widow, Marie Monville, experienced desperation, then God's grace

By Kaitlyn Folmer, Natasha Singh, Suzan Clarke, Sept. 30, 2013, ABC News

The wife of the man who stormed into a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pa., seven years ago, shooting 10 schoolgirls, five of them fatally, will never forget. … The gunman was Charles Roberts, a father of three and husband. …

In an interview with ABC News' Amy Robach, Marie Monville, 35, was asked if she knew why her husband did what he did. … In his letter to her, her husband wrote about Elise, the couple's first child, [who] died 20 minutes after being born three months premature. "And in some way he felt like he was getting back at the Lord for the loss that we had sustained," she said. …

Monville told Robach about having to break the news of their father's death -- and crimes -- to her children. Abigail was 7, Bryce was 5 and Carson was 18 months old. …

Marie Monville says she has forgiven Charles Roberts, even though it wasn't easy. "Charlie had an illness. And it doesn't excuse what he did. … But, you know, if I allow **bitterness** and **anger** to live inside of me? Those were the very things that pushed him to do what he did. I don't want anything to do with that," she said.

"It's not like I could forgive him once for what he did and never have to think about it again. It's something that I think about all the time," she said. "But I don't have to just forgive Charlie for him. I have to forgive him so that I can be whole, and so that it doesn't eat away inside of me the same way that he allowed anger to eat away inside of him." …

"I had come from this place of desperation and saw God walking me through it and working out places of beauty from the ashes of my life," she said. (*Marie has remarried*)

http://abcnews.go.com/US/amish-school-shooters-widow-marie-monville-remembers-tragedy/story?id=20417790

Jesus: Be merciful to the ungrateful and evil, even as your Father is merciful – Luke 6:35-36 ESV

[35] But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of **the Most High**, for he **is kind to the ungrateful and the evil**. [36] **Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful**.

When anger comes from the fear of not being loved:

"A **gentle answer** turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." – Proverbs 15:1 NIV
"**Forgiveness** opens the grace channel. And resentment clogs it up." – Pastor Joe McKeever
"**Behind every problem is a brilliantly disguised opportunity.**" – John W. Gardner

Jesus asks God to forgive those who crucified him – Luke 23:32-34 ESV

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And **Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** And they cast lots to divide his garments.

Blessing Prayer – Philippians 1:6, 9-11 NCV

God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again. … This is my prayer for you: that your love will grow more and more; that you will have knowledge and understanding with your love; that you will see the difference between good and bad and will choose the good; that you will be pure and without wrong for the coming of Christ; that you will do many good things with the help of Christ to bring glory and praise to God.

Week Five – [9] **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.**
Matt. 5:9 ESV

The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace — *Romans 14:17*
music: Jacques Berthier
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The kingdom of God is justice and peace
and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Come, Lord, and open in us
the gates of your kingdom.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture — *Lectio Divina*

A Forgiving, Generous King and an Unforgiving Servant – Matthew 18:21-34 NLT

[21] Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

[22] "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!

[23] "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. [24] In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. [25] He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold-- along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned-- to pay the debt.

[26] "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.'

[27] Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

[28] "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

[29] "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded.

[30] But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

[31] "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened.

[32] Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. [33] Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'

[34] Then the angry king sent the man to prison … until he had paid his entire debt.

Lectio Divina – Reading of the Living Word

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First reading: Head

What does the Holy Spirit draw your attention to- what word or phrase resonates?
Notice it, and pray it back to God.

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What is going on inside you as you sit with whatever you noticed? What are you *feeling* as the Holy Spirit stirs God's word deep into your soul? Notice it, and talk with God about it.

Third reading: Habit (*from Latin "habitus", character*)

How might whatever you're noticing reflect what the Holy Spirit is praying in you and for you?
What is God calling you to, in being or in doing?

Rest.

Rest in God's arms, "like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2), enjoying his loving embrace.

(Lectio Divina developed for the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary c 2005 Susan Porterfield Currie)

Week Five – [9] **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.**
Matt. 5:9 ESV

For Prayer and Meditation at Home – The Kingdom of God is Wisdom, Justice, Grace and Peace

Isaiah's prophecies of the coming Messiah and the coming Kingdom of God – Isaiah 11:2-9 ESV

And **the Spirit of the LORD** shall rest upon him, **the Spirit of wisdom and understanding**, …
with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. …
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra. …
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

James: The Wisdom of God is Peaceable, Gentle, Full of Mercy, Righteous– James 3:13, 17-18 ESV

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the **meekness of wisdom**. … But the wisdom from above is first **pure**, then **peaceable**, **gentle**, open to **reason**, full of **mercy** and good fruits, **impartial** and **sincere**. [18] And **a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace**.

Jesus came to call sinners who need healing and peace with God – Mark 2:14b-17 ESV

Jesus saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." … And the scribes of the Pharisees … said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **I came not to call the righteous, but sinners**."

Jesus promised if you forgive others, your heavenly Father will also forgive you – Matt. 6:12-15 ESV

Forgive us our debts, **as we also have forgiven** our debtors. …
For **if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you**, but **if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses**.

Paul: Live Peaceably with All and Overcome Evil with Good – Romans 12:18-21 ESV

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live **peaceably** with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but **leave it to the wrath of God**, for it is written, "**Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord**." To the contrary, "**if your enemy is hungry, feed him**; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." … Do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good**.

Truth and justice lead to peace – Zechariah 8:16-17 NLT

"But this is what you must do: Tell the **truth** to each other. Render verdicts in your courts that are **just** and that lead to **peace**. Don't scheme against each other. Stop your love of telling lies that you swear are the truth. I hate all these things, says the LORD."

Blessing Prayer – 1 Thess. 3:9-13 NLT

How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. [10] Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith. [11] May God our Father and our Lord Jesus bring us to you very soon.

[12] And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows. [13] May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen.

Week Six **Matthew 5:10-12** ESV

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Within Our Darkest Night Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, that never dies away. *© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France, 1991*

See: Exodus 13:21-22 (pillar of fire), 1 Kings 18:38 (fire), Song of Solomon 8:6-7 (flame of the LORD), Matthew 3:11 (Holy Spirit and fire), Luke 12:49 (fire on the earth), Luke 23:44 (crucifixion darkness), John 1:5 (light shines in the darkness), Acts 2:3 (Pentecost tongues as of fire), 2 Corinthians 4:6-18 (let light shine out of darkness)

Prayerfully Reading Scripture – Luke 6:20-38 ESV – the Sermon on the Plain *Lectio Divina*

Jesus: Blessings, Rewards and Woes, Love for Enemies

20 And Jesus lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours
is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. "Blessed are
you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn
your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your
reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

24 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 Woe to you who are
full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.
26 Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

27 But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those
who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other
also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. 30 Give to everyone
who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. 31 And as you
wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

32 If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who
love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even
sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to
you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.

35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will
be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. 37 Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn
not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you.
Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the
measure you use it will be measured back to you.

Lectio Divina – Reading of the Living Word

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Third reading: Habit (*from Latin "habitus", character*) - How might whatever you're noticing reflect what the Holy Spirit is praying in you and for you? What is God calling you to, in being or in doing?

Rest. - Rest in God's arms, "like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2), enjoying his loving embrace.

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For Prayer and Meditation at Home – God rewards the persecuted with the Kingdom of Heaven

David's Song of Thanksgiving when the LORD saved him from his enemies **– 2 Samuel 22:2-3, 26-28** NLT

"The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; … **you save me from violence**. …
To the **faithful** you show yourself faithful; to those with **integrity** you show integrity.
To the **pure** you show yourself pure, but to the wicked you show yourself hostile.
You rescue the humble, but your eyes watch the proud and humiliate them.

A Blessing Prayer when persecuted; keep repeating to bring peace to your mind

"Lord God, please bless them and change me." – author unknown

God's promise of protection – Isaiah 43:1-5 **NRSV**

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; **when you walk through fire you shall not be burned**, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. …
Because **you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you**, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. **Do not fear, for I am with you.** …

God's just final judgment – Miroslav Volf

"Without **entrusting** oneself to the God who judges justly, it will hardly be possible to follow the crucified Messiah and refuse to retaliate when abused. **The certainty of God's just judgment at the end of history** is the presupposition for the renunciation of violence in the middle of it."
– Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 302.

God's help in trouble – Psalm 46:1-2, 5, 10-11 NIV *A song*

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear. …
God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. …
He says, "**Be still, and know that I am God**; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." **The LORD Almighty is with us**; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

God's grace in healing bitterness – Hebrews 12:14-15 ESV

Strive for **peace** with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God**; that **no "root of bitterness"** springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

God's liberating forgiveness

"**He is not a part of my life anymore. Forgiveness has freed me of that, of him completely. I'm not going to make him a lifetime partner.**"
– Rev. Anthony B. Thompson, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, S.C., speaking of Dylann Roof who shot 14 people at the church June 17, 2015, killing Thompson's wife Myra and 8 others to try to start a race war.
New York Times Quotation of the Day, Dec. 16, 2016 "Today's Headlines" email

God's peace under persecution – John 16:33 NKJV

Jesus: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have **peace**. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, **I have overcome** the world."

God's peace, joy, grace, and power in the face of death – Corrie ten Boom, prison survivor

During World War II Corrie was imprisoned in the Ravensbrück Nazi concentration camp for hiding Jews. After the war she traveled to share the Gospel message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. She once spoke at a church in a small **African** country where a new government had begun systematically arresting and executing Christians. She saw fear and tension on every face. So she told them of an incident she experienced at Ravensbrück:

"A group of my fellow prisoners had approached me, asking me to tell them some Bible stories. In the concentration camp the guards called the Bible *das Lugenbuch*—the book of lies. **Cruel death punishment had been promised for any prisoner who was found possessing a Bible or talking about the Lord.** However, I went to my little cot, found my Bible and returned to the group of prisoners.

"Suddenly I was aware of a figure behind me. One of the prisoners formed the words with her lips, 'Hide your Bible. It's Lony.' I knew Lony well. She was one of the most cruel of all the women guards. However, **I knew that I had to obey God who had guided me so clearly to bring a Bible message to the prisoners** that morning. Lony remained motionless behind me while I finished my teaching. Then I said, 'Let's now sing a hymn of praise.'

"I could see the worried, anxious looks on the faces of the prisoners. Before it had been only me speaking. Now they too were going to have to use their mouths to sing. **But I felt God wanted us to be bold even in the face of the enemy. So—we sang.**

"When the hymn was finished, I heard a voice behind me. 'Another song like that one,' she said. It was Lony. She had enjoyed the singing and wanted to hear more. The prisoners took heart and we sang again—and again.

"Afterwards I went to her and spoke to her about the Lord Jesus Christ. Strangely, her behavior began to change until, in a crude sort of way, she became a friend. …

"'Let me tell you what I learned from that experience,' I told [my vulnerable African friends]. 'I knew that every word I said could mean death. Yet never before had I felt such **peace and joy** in my heart as while I was giving the Bible message in the presence of mine enemy. **God gave me the grace and power I needed.'** …

Gone were the wrinkles of fear and anxiety … and their hearts were filled with peace."

– *Corrie ten Boom with Jamie Buckingham, Tramp for the Lord: The Story that Begins Where The Hiding Place Ends, Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1974, p. 124-127.*

Blessing Prayer – God's protection from spiritual forces of evil – Ephesians 6:10-18 ESV

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

Week Seven – **Matthew 5:13-16** ESV

You are the salt of the earth. ... You are the light of the world.
Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

With You, O Lord, Is Life in All Its Fullness
music: Jacques Berthier, 1998
© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé,
71250 Taizé, France

With you, O Lord, is life in all its fullness, *Psalm 36:6-10*
And in your light we shall see true light.
With you, O Lord, is life in all its fullness,
And in your light we shall see true light.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture – *Lectio Divina*

Jesus: Matthew 5:13-16 ESV

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Paul: 2 Corinthians 4:5-7 ESV

5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

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Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

For Prayer and Meditation at Home

"If the Gospel were truly preached, the Christian people would be spared many wars."
"**Give light** and the darkness will disappear of itself." - Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536)

Jesus the light of the world – John 12:44, 46 ESV

"I have come into the world as **light**, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."

The commissioning of the disciples in the name of the Triune God – Matthew 28:18-20 ESV

And Jesus came and said to them, "All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. And **behold, I am with you always**, to the end of the age."

The other sheep to be brought in – John 10:14-16 ESV

Jesus: I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. [16] And **I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice**.
So there will be **one flock, one shepherd**.

The true vine and the branches – John 15:7-9 ESV

Jesus: **If you abide in me**, and my words abide in you, **ask whatever you wish**, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you **bear much fruit** and so **prove to be my disciples**. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. **Abide in my love.**

The way out to a better side

Amy Barnes's abusive ex-husband kept calling her cell phone. At some point, Amy said she'd simply had enough. ... "I was so angry and filled with hate, but I actually felt sorry for him, because I knew him as a person, and there is a legitimately good side of him, and he's had a horrible life as a child, which is not an excuse, but he doesn't know anything different.

"**So I said, 'I have forgiven you for what you did to me and my kids, and you have no control over me anymore**.' There was dead silence, and it felt like an eternity, and he hung up. And I have never heard from him since then." (*p. 18*)

"**I coach and counsel people now and I help them get healthy**. When you're living an unhealthy life, there's nobody who can tell you there's a **better side**, unless **there's somebody who's actually been to the other side to show you there's a way out**." (*p. 29*)

Hoda Kotb with Jane Lorenzini. *Ten Years Later: Six People Who Faced Adversity and Transformed Their Lives*, Chapter 1 - the life of Amy Barnes. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013, p. 18, 29.

The new commandment Jesus gave – John 13:12-17, 34-35 ESV

When **Jesus had washed their feet** and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For **I have given you an example**, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ... If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. ...
A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are **my disciples**,
if you have love for one another."

The judgment of the nations – Matt. 25:31-40 ESV

Jesus: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are **blessed** by my Father, **inherit the kingdom** prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For **I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.**'

“Then the **righteous** will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we ... ?

“And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, **as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me**.'”

The promise of living water – John 4:13-15 NIV *Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well*

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, **the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**" The woman said to him, "Sir, **give me this water** ... “

The promise of the Holy Spirit – John 14:25-27 ESV

Jesus: These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But **the Helper, the Holy Spirit**, whom the Father will send in my name, he **will teach you all things** and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Peace I leave with you; **my peace I give to you**. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

The power of the Holy Spirit – Acts 1:8 ESV

Jesus: But **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you**, and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and **to the end of the earth**.

The Ministry of Reconciliation – 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 ESV

Paul: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. **All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation**; that is, **in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.**

The Blessing of Children – Mark 10:14b-16 ESV

Jesus: "**Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.** Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And **he took them in his arms and blessed them**, laying his hands on them.

Blessing Prayer – Ephesians 3:14-21 ESV

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [15] from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, [16] that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, [17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith-- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Week Eight **The Beatitudes, Salt, and Light** **Matthew 5:1-16** ESV

Summary and Post-test

Taizé Music: The Lord Is My Light *Psalm 27:1*

composer: Jacques Berthier
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The Lord is my light, my light and salvation:
in God I trust, in God I trust.

Prayerfully Reading Scripture *Lectio Divina*

The Beatitudes, Salt, and Light – Matthew 5:1-16 ESV

From the Sermon on the Mount

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.
2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. *(v. 9 is KJV)*
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
13 You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.
14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

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Week Eight **The Beatitudes, Salt, and Light** **Matthew 5:1-16** ESV
Summary and Post-test

For Prayer and Meditation at Home – **God Entrusts to Us the Ministry of Love and Reconciliation**

Living in harmony as God's chosen people – Colossians 3:12-15 NIV

Paul: Therefore, as God's chosen people, **holy and dearly loved**, clothe yourselves with **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you**.
And over all these virtues put on **love**, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the **peace of Christ** rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to **peace**. And **be thankful**.

Practicing the gift you have – 1 Timothy 4:13-15 ESV

Paul: Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. **Do not neglect the gift you have**, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them. ...

Seeking first the Kingdom of God – Matthew 6:24-34 ESV

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. **You cannot serve God and money**.

Therefore I tell you, **do not be anxious about your life**, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet **your heavenly Father feeds them**. Are you not of more value than they?
And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ...

But **seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you**. **Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble**.

Believing God will heal all suffering In the end – Fyodor Dostoevsky, in *Brothers Karamazov*:

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, … that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men."

(Translated by Constance Garnett, New York: Random House, Modern Library edition, 1996, 261-2)

Blessing the Lord who gives counsel and protection – Psalm 16:7-9 ESV

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.
I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
Therefore **my heart is glad**, and **my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure**.

Blessing Prayer – 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 ESV

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, [12] so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX C

HANDOUT QUESTIONS FOR EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

Name: _____ Date:_____

Version of the Bible I am using: _____ (ESV, NIV, KJV, NCB, etc.)

Reflection questions[1] – answer briefly, as you are able

1. What about these verses and stories interests you or intrigues you?

2. What do these verses and stories show you about who God is and how God feels about you?

3. Name one or two ways God has acted to help people in these verses and stories.

4. What in these verses and stories is hard to understand or doesn't seem to make sense?

5. Name one or two troubles or conflicts people were having in these verses and stories.

6. What similar troubles or conflicts are you or other people having today?

7. Name one or two important promises God made to the people in these verses and stories.

8. How do God's promises give you hope for living through your troubles or conflicts today?

9. How do you know or feel that God is active in your life and your world?

10. How could God's grace, truth and forgiveness empower you to take action in your own situation?

1. Questions are modified from a "Sermon Reflection Questions" handout given in a Bible study led by professor Rev. Dr. Sally Brown at the Princeton Theological Seminary alumni reunion, Princeton, NJ, May 16, 2018.

APPENDIX D

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST FOR EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

Name: _____ Date:_____

Answer as many as you can

1. Using the 7 point scale below, circle **how close you feel to God** at this particular moment.[1]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel very far from God						I feel very close to God

2. Using the scale below, circle how you feel about **God's forgiveness** at this particular moment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
God is very unforgiving						God is very forgiving

3. Using the scale below, circle how you feel **God thinks of you** at this particular moment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
God is angry with me						God wants to help me grow

4. Using the scale below, circle how you feel about **how much God cares** at this particular moment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
God does not care that much about me						God cares a lot about me

5. Using the scale below, circle how much at this particular moment you feel **God cares about the things you do**.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
God does not care much about what I do						God cares a lot about what I do

1. Questions 1-2 and 4-6 are modified from Bryan Auday, "Seminar Evaluation Form, Figure 13," *Research Methodology*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008, A-8.

6. Using the scale below, circle how much you feel that **God wants to help you in hard times** at this particular moment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
God leaves me on my own in hard times						God wants to help me a lot in hard times

Answer briefly as many as you can

7. What about the topic "loving and forgiving when life hurts" interests you or intrigues you? [2]

8. How would you briefly describe who God is and how God feels about you?

9. Name one or two ways God has acted to help people in the Bible and in recent human history.

10. What are some parts of the Bible and recent human history that are hard to understand or do not seem to make sense?

11. Name one or two of the most important personal troubles or conflicts people had in the Bible and in recent human history, as you see it.

12. What similar troubles or conflicts are you or other people having today?

13. Name one or two important promises that God made to people in the Bible.

14. How do God's promises give you hope for living through your troubles or conflicts today?

15. How do you know or feel that God is active in your life and your world?

16. How do God's grace, truth and forgiveness empower you to take action in your own situations?

17. When you were a child, what did you learn about "loving and forgiving when life hurts" from your parents or others?

18. What does the word "forgiveness" mean to you?

19. How would you explain the difference between forgiving someone and excusing someone?

20. What is your greatest challenge in healing relationships after trouble or a conflict?

2. Questions 7-16 are modified from a "Sermon Reflection Questions" handout in a Bible study led by professor Rev. Dr. Sally Brown at the Princeton Theological Seminary alumni reunion, Princeton, NJ, May 16, 2018.

APPENDIX E

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST PARTICIPANT ANSWERS

Participants and Dates:

		Post-test			No Post-test
Code	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**	**Code**	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**
A.	9/2018	6/2019	L.	9/2018	did not finish class
B.	9/2018	7/2019	M.	9/2018	"
C.	9/2018	3/2020	N.	9/2018	"
D.	9/2018	5/2019	O.	1/2020	"
E.	9/2018	2/2019	P.	10/2018	class cancelled midway
F.	12/2018	2/2019	Q.	10/2018	"
G.	12/2018	2/2019	R.	10/2018	"
H.	12/2018	2/2019	S.	10/2018	"
I.	12/2018	2/2019	T.	10/2018	"
J.	1/2020	7/2020	U.	10/2018	"
K.	6/2020	7/2020	V.	3/2020	class cancelled midway
			W.	3/2020	"
			X.	3/2020	"
			Y.	3/2020	"
			Z.	3/2020	"
			AA.	3/2020	"

11 participants completed a pre-test and a post-test
16 participants completed a pre-test only, did not finish the class
27 total participants

Codes were re-assigned sequentially after all classes were completed to group together those who completed the class.

Test dates include only the month and year to preserve confidentiality, since participants completed the post-test in various small group classes.

Questions 1-6, Pre-test Participant Answers

Code	Pre-test	Pre-test Question 1	Pre-test Question 2	Pre-test Question 3	Pre-test Question 4	Pre-test Question 5	Pre-test Question 6
A.	9/2018	6	7	4	6	7	7
B.	9/2018	4	7	3	3	4	6
C.	9/2018	3	7	7	7	7	7
D.	9/2018	7	7	7	7	7	7
E.	9/2018	4	7	7	7	7	7
F.	12/2018	3	5	4	7	7	7
G.	12/2018	7	6	6	6	5	7
H.	12/2018	7	7	7	7	7	7
I.	12/2018	7	7	7	7	7	7
J.	1/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7
K.	6/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7
L.	9/2018	3	4	4	4	3	5
M.	9/2018	3	5	7	7	7	7
N.	9/2018	5	6	5	7	7	7
O.	1/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7
P.	10/2018	3	7	7	7	7	7
Q.	10/2018	6	7	6	7	7	7
R.	10/2018	7	7	7	7	7	7
S.	10/2018	6	7	6	7	7	7
T.	10/2018	2	3	3	2	2	3
U.	10/2018	6	7	7	6	6	6
V.	3/2020	4	4	5	6	6	3
W.	3/2020	5	7	7	7	7	7
X.	3/2020	5	6	7	6	6	6
Y.	3/2020	4	6	7	7	7	6
Z.	3/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7
AA.	3/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7

Participants A-K finished the class and took the post-test.
Participants L-AA did not finish the class for various reasons and did not take the post-test.
I re-assigned codes sequentially after all classes were completed to group together those who completed the class.

Test dates include only the month and year to preserve confidentiality, since participants completed the post-test in various small group classes.

Questions 1-6, Post-test Participant Answers

Code	Post-test	Post-test Question 1	Post-test Question 2	Post-test Question 3	Post-test Question 4	Post-test Question 5	Post-test Question 6
A.	6/2019	7	7	3	7	7	7
B.	7/2019	5	7	7	5	5	7
C.	3/2020	2	7	7	7	7	7
D.	5/2019	7	7	7	7	7	7
E.	2/2019	5	7	7	7	7	7
F.	2/2019	7	7	4	7	7	7
G.	2/2019	6	5	5	5	6	4
H.	2/2019	7	7	7	7	7	7
I.	2/2019	7	7	7	7	6	7
J.	7/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7
K.	7/2020	7	7	7	7	7	7

Participants A-K finished the class and took the post-test.
Participants L-AC did not finish the class for various reasons and did not take the post-test.
I re-assigned codes sequentially after all classes were completed to group together those who completed the class.

Questions 7-20, Participant Answers

Participants L-AC did not finish the class for various reasons and did not take the post-test. Only some of the most significant of their answers to questions 7-20 are included, to decrease the volume of data to be analyzed.

The following answers are given exactly as written with minor corrections in spelling and grammar and with the possibility of errors due to difficulties in reading some handwriting.
Pronouns for God are given exactly as written, capitalized or not capitalized.
Unclear words are copied in brackets with a question mark, such as: "feeling stuck in [*there*?]."
Unreadable words are noted in brackets as [*unable to read*].

7. What about the topic "loving and forgiving when life hurts" interests you or intrigues you?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Learning how to reach someone you want forgiveness from."

B: "repentance"

C: "It's on God's heart."

D: "It is very on point with things that are going on even if it isn't pertaining to me."

E: "The whole title – I've been (still am) in this situation, and am in the midst of healing and restoring relationship with my older brother."

F: "I need to forgive. If Jesus can forgive so can I."

G: “intrigues”

H: “Right now life hurts, trust me, I went to jail for 14 months to try and protect my husband and he took my little baby from me. I have to go back for my case. God loves, God forgives, so I love, I forgive.”

I: “It’s choosing to love even when it hurts because love does hurt because it costs us something which we may not understand & it can hurt. How [*unable to read*] our perceptions or expectations.”

J: “interests me”

K: “Loving Song, sitting at a waterfront lookout”

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: “How much forgiveness is for you.”

M: “even when you’re hurting you can love and forgive others”

N: “Just a few days ago, I had tragedy strike my family. Life hurts right now and I need to love and forgive this situation.”

P: “It’s a topic in which many people fail to accomplish. Mastering this is important to me.”

S: “I went through a terrible situation where I had to walk away from a group that I loved because at my lowest point in life they abandoned me.”

V: “’when life hurts’, because it does hurt!”

Y: “that I could learn to love unconditionally”

Z: “Not only is forgiving hard, I feel we often don’t know how to love someone who has hurt us.”

AA: “Even the people I hurt forgive me and love me. I struggle with my own guilt for things I’ve done.”

Post-test Answers:

A: “Doing God’s will in spite of personal pain.”

B: “Why it’s important interests me.”

C: [*no answer given*]

D: “That after doing this study, really taking the time to read God’s word, that he clearly states how much he loves us.”

E: “The possibilities that can come to you when you’re hurting and choose to love instead of hate or [belittle?], to forgive rather than hold a grudge & be angry all the time.”

F: “It's important to forgive others as God forgives you.”

G: “It's intriguing because it's a difficult subject to reflect on.”

H: “Life hurts a lot. You must always love and forgive. God loves and forgives us.”

I: “It’s difficult to love and forgive when hurt but it is an important [*unable to read*] to bring [freedom?].”

J: “God loves me and I know he also will forgive me. He comforts me when I'm spending my alone time with him.”

K: “to forgive—to no longer blame or be angry with someone”

8. How would you briefly describe who God is and how God feels about you?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "God always forgives no matter what we do. He will never forsake me."

B: "Jesus, love"

C: "Almighty. He stepped down so far for me."

D: "Creator, He loves me and knows my name. He has called me for such a time as this."

E: "God is creator of the universe who cares about the details of our lives and wants us to share a loving relationship with Him. He loves us so much He gave His life for us."

F: "God loves me and He's kept me safe all my life."

G: "God is my savior and he loves me"

H: "God is love and God loves me. I love him. I'm depending on Him to give me wisdom and strength. I'm persistent not strong physically but persistent."

I: "God is everything. He is love. He loves me despite what I do [*unable to read*] I can reflect His love by obedience and [*unable to read*]."

J: "God is who I rely on, one person I know is always there for me, the one person I know loves me."

K: "God is the one and only, who cares about me."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "He's the creator of all that is created. Some times I feel very unworthy of God's love & forgiveness."

M: "God is my Father, Creator; he loves me."

N: "God is my healer, my teacher and my friend. He loves me more than I can even put into words."

O: "God is powerful, mighty and ever present, he adores me."

P: "a caring understanding person who puts me through obstacles in order for me to grow"

T: "I'm unsure how he feels about me"

V: "mighty power, distant, ??"

X: "God is my father and he loves me."

Y: "He is my only father. He wants the best for me and loves me."

Z: "God is a God of love and forgiveness. He loves me with a love I will never be able to fully understand."

AA: "God is my father, he is perfect, pure and he forgives me when I tell him my sins. He loves me."

Post-test Answers:

A: "God is all knowing and powerful. He knows me better than I know myself."

B: "God is a source that loves (me)."

C: "Supreme Being, perfect, eternal, loves me far more than I can comprehend."

D: "God is so many things. God's a healer and restorer. He teaches us every day something new about him and ourselves. He loves me soo soo much!"

E: "God is Love beyond measure – His love and tenderness are always available. God loves me and wants what's best for me all the time."

F: "God loves me, he brought me here."

G: "God is almighty and I know he loves me"

H: "God is love. God loves me."

I: "God loves me and he is passionate for my [heart?]"

J: "God is my heavenly father, He is always there for me & I know He loves me as His child. I can always go to Him."

K: "God loves me, because he died for me. God is love."

9. Name one or two ways God has acted to help people in the Bible and in recent human history.

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Samson regained his strength after Deliah cut his hair."

B: "Sarah – childbirth, Moses – Red Sea, after murder"

C: "me: finally, after many years, having medications I need;
Many learning about Jesus thru Christian radio today."

D: "Provided for their needs food, clothes, shelter, and done miracles both past and present."

E: "Daniel when he was put in the lions' den; Saul renamed Paul who killed early Christians. God used him to bring people to faith in Jesus & God still uses him today by the letters he wrote to early churches. God sends people to rescue others in distress like flooding & fires. God used people to teach me so much about Him, His love, mercy, grace & forgiveness."

F: "Helped Moses by telling him about the flood. He helps me in Ephesians when tells me put on the armor of God."

G: "he has healed and he has saved"

H: "In the Bible God helped Paul make the church. God helped heal people in the Bible. He helped Lazarus. In my life he's carrying me through my case."

I: "delivering from slavery, Jesus coming [*unable to read*]"

J: "He gave Abraham and Elizabeth a blessing with having a child. He saves lives every day."

K: "God will comfort and strengthen, he has healed the sick and suffering"

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: He used Peter who denied him three times to build his church. He used [*name*]'s death as a way to lead me back to Him."

M: "his son died on the cross for <u>everyone's</u> sins"

N: "By sending his son to die for our sins. He gave Joshua the courage and strength to help in the fall of Jericho."

O: "In the bible he told Noah to build an ark."

S: "He has saved my life many times"

W: "He sacrificed His son so our sins will be forgiven."

AA: "He has sent Jesus on the cross for us to suffer for our sins. He forgave many, because they had faith."

Post-test Answers:

A: "God provided honest men of integrity to fight against slavery."

B: "Joseph: instruction and prosperity, faith cultivation, humility.
Abraham: child rearing, etc."

C: "Passover, leading thru wilderness."
Recent: "I hear stories of Muslims meeting Christ in unusual ways."

D: "The O.T. is proof that people fail God time after time, but God is always showing mercy on them."

E: "The loaves & fishes to feed many; He calls people to missions to share the love of God and offer the salvation of their souls through Jesus Christ."

F: "Noah with the flood, Moses with the people"

G: "helped me like Joshua and Peter"

H: "love and mercy"

I: "Exodus—providing bread in the wilderness; putting Trump in office"

J: "He restores lives and teaches us through His word."

K: "He gives us the comfort and strength, and Holy Spirit"

10. What are some parts of the Bible and recent human history that are hard to understand or do not seem to make sense?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Revelation"

B: "Unanswered prayer. Why those who do not believe are very blessed and I suffer. Lack of healing."

C: "How He could love us to such an immeasurable extent! How can it be?"

D: "Bible makes sense, human history makes sense in the sense that sin is in the world and most are controlled by it. We are called to be different, set apart from it."

E: "the book of Revelation holds many mysteries; some books of the prophets; why the Twin Towers imploded"

F: "all the technical aspects past and future"

G: "people's sickness"

H: "I'm in Acts right now. I'm sure Revelations is going to be hard."

I: "How He uses the [unseemly?] of this world instruments [to accomplish?] his [word/work?]. In Jeremiah and Lamentations the wars, but I understand them."

J: "When people don't want God in their lives"

K: "I love each page of the Bible. All of the Bible makes sense, because look at the world."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "How Peter could deny Jesus after following Jesus teaching him for three years. The Holocaust, how our country didn't step up."

M: "most of the Bible because I haven't read it fully"

N: "Genesis and Revelation."

O: "Daniel in the furnace, and the lion's den"

Y: "death of children, sickness, racial hate, slavery"

Z: "why so many people and nations reject a Loving God"

AA: "The disaster, Noah's Ark, all the world gone except Noah and family, a lot of death."

Post-test Answers:

A: "It does not make sense that so many people in our country allow separation of immigrant families—mothers and children."

B: "Predestination. Why is it so hard for others to admit when they are wrong. Why other 'believers' are not always convicted."

C: Bible: "Why do we have to know all the directions for constructing of the temple?" History: "I don't know that this is difficult → it's been prophesied."

D: "Parts of the O.T. seem hard to understand. Some human history about how evil can happen like the Holocaust don't make sense but ultimately God allowed it."

E: "I have no understanding of '9/11'"

F: "the early Bible with all the laws and rules"

G: "the salt losing taste & manna from the sky"

H: "People being so cruel to other people. We are all one and God's creation."

I: [*no answer given*]

J: "Sometimes it's hard to understand why he loves us so much, when we've sinned."

K: "I take my time. It makes a lot of sense."

11. Name one or two of the most important personal troubles or conflicts people had in the Bible and in recent human history, as you see it.

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Sexual harassment in today's society."

B: "Jews wandering to the Promised Land. Abraham having two sons with two different women."

C: "God and Israel. Judas. Israel and Palestine. Turkey and Greece."

D: "Sexual immorality, love of money both brought great downfall at all of these times."

E: "Joseph with his brothers time after time – and then he ended up blessing them. The flooding so much in the last few years."

F: "Cain and Abel and Donald Trump"

G: "Paul's imprisonment, war"

H: "Personal troubles in the Bible starting with Adam and Eve. Son against father. Mother against daughter. Husband against wife. The Cain and Abel jealousy. It just goes on. Recent history—going to jail, feeling stuck in [*there*?]."

I: "Provision, Doubt"

J: "People having hard lives. They don't know God. People not getting salvation in their lives."

K: "being faithful, having doubt"

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "childhood cancer (St Jude's). David before he became King still honored Saul even though he was after David to kill him."

M: "holocaust"

N: "Lust and Jealousy"

O: "wars, famine, drug abuse, the murder of the 12/Christ"

P: "which to follow, humans or God"

U: "resisting the temptation to sin"

Y: "loving their neighbor as themself"

AA: "having faith in Jesus"

Post-test Answers:

A: "hatred of people with different sexual orientation"

B: "mixing faith and religion with government, slavery and oppression"

C: [*no answer given*]

D: "I see a theme of disobedience in the Bible. Not wanting to sacrifice and do things God's way. The O.T. has a big pattern of that."

E: "David when he gazed at Bathsheba and took her as his own, killed her husband & lost his 1st child with her. Our president with everything he does Congress & others seem to have issues."

F: "following the 10 commandments"

G: "late pregnancy births and not trusting in the Lord"

H: "People believing in Jesus and people being saved. So many don't want to believe."

I: "Doubt, unbelief, rebellion"

J: "we have all sinned"

K: "forgiveness, angry"

12. What similar troubles or conflicts are you or other people having today?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "gossip"

B: "I feel God has forgotten me."

C: "Pride"

D: "There is nothing new under the sun so we are going through all the things they went through [*aen*?] Jesus"

E: "I've had troubles with family – some have been restored. I have conflicts within myself that I struggle with."

F: "I have no idea – everyday problems"

G: "sharing custody for the holidays of my children"

H: "We all need more understanding and love. People put too much importance on stuff and money."

I: "Breaking free of habits, managing stability"

J: "There are people who go to church, claim to be Christians and not living the righteous life they need to be living."

K: "Don't love each other"

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "After speaking my testimony thoughts & feelings started to come back mostly [*guilt*?]."

M: "loving one another, loving one's self"

N: "Generational sin & peer pressure."

O: "lack of tolerance, disrespectfulness, gossip/rumors"

S: "Treating others who don't care about me as Christ treated/loved the church"

T: "Dealing with recent breakup, and one-year anniversary of father's suicide"

W: "Being weak and satisfying my fleshly desires"

Y: "forgiving my mother, loving people just because Jesus does"

Z: "relationship with each other and God"

AA: "focusing on being alone, work, having time with God"

Post-test Answers:

A: "Lack or denial of medical services to the elderly and to people who have worked all their lives"

B: "Reconciling with how the Bible is used to discriminate and oppress."

C: Others: "Heb. 11" [great heroes of the faith were tortured, suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, were killed with the sword, etc.]

D: "Dying to self daily. Letting go of worldly behaviors and giving God more control."

E: "These are times people seem to find fail in everything I do or don't do – you can't please people – we only need to please God & be acceptable in His eyes"

F: "following rules and obeying God"

G: "love and trust issues"

H: "Same [as question 11 answer]. It's hard to not see and still believe."

I: "Doubt, unbelief, rebellion"

J: "We have sinned also, but God [*forgave me?*] if we repented our sins and do the will of God, and live a righteous life."

K: "not too much, I pray about people talking about me. I keep on praying and I'm not angry about it."

V: "family conflict"

13. Name one or two important promises that God made to people in the Bible.

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Life after death to believers."

B: "childbirth; never leave us"

C: "I will never leave you. Love you with an everlasting love."

D: "To provide a helper, Holy Spirit, and to save His people (through His son Jesus)"

E: "that He would never leave us nor forsake us"

F: "40 years of wandering led to their land"

G: [*no answer given*]

H: "He promised to make us a nation and He promised us land and we would come together after being scattered. I'm Jewish." [She also identifies as Christian.]

I: "He would never leave us or forsake us. That He would return."

J: "He loves us unconditionally. If you are saved and live a righteous life you will go to heaven one day."

K: "You will have eternal life. He will never leave us or forsake us."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "Solomon's wisdom, also wealth. Jesus's return for us."

M: "never ran again for 40 days & 40 nights. God is coming back for us one day … soon!"

N: "He will never leave or forsake us. Restore what the locust & worm ate.

O: "he will never leave/forsake us — we have an advocate Jesus"

S: "He will never leave nor forsake me"

V: "He will be with us"

W: "He has a plan to give us a prosperous future, and not to harm us. Promises to give us abundant life."

Y: "forgiveness, new life"

Z: "I will never leave you nor forsake you"

AA: "If they follow him, they will have eternal life. I am always with you."

Post-test Answers:

A: "salvation and heavenly rewards"

B: "Abraham – father of nations"

C: "I will never leave you or forsake you."
"1 Peter 5:7" [casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you]
"2 Peter 3:13" [new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells]

D: "That God would never leave nor forsake us."

E: "He promised to save us from our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ as the sacrifice needed to pay the price."

F: "He would never make another flood. Jesus died to forgive us our sins."

G: "He will heal them and feed them"

H: "Promise of eternal life. Promise eternal peace, a new body."

I: "that if you obeyed parents [→ *long life*?] and His promises are yes and Amen"

J: "If we do what is righteous, his will we will be promised to go to His heavenly Kingdom."

K: "Blessed the meek, Blessed pure Heart"

14. How do God's promises give you hope for living through your troubles or conflicts today?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "He forgives"

B: "The Bible says He keeps his promises."

C: "It is God that makes the promises hopeful and sure—He's Almighty. He knows the entire situation. He keeps His promises, never lies."

D: "Makes things easier to go through, even when I can't remember I can look back and see how what He promised was @ work."

E: "He said in His Word that He would provide our needs, He is always with"

F: "God promises blessings if you obey"

G: [*no answer given*]

H: "God's going to take care of all of us no matter what. He loves us, He has us."

I: "because he will bring good out of anything and he never leaves me"

J: "I know God loves me and will be with me, and will bring me through."

K: "His work and his words. And he will take our burden."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "I survived an overdose & 2 Christians took me into their home until they found a faith-based program for me."

M: "because he is always there with me in troubling times. He loves me no matter what."

N: "I don't have to feel alone or depressed. God is a healer and [reunites?] family."

O: "I have hope that trials/troubles are for a season"

S: "I know that through it all He holds me in his arms"

V: "He promises tough times, but He will walk thru those with us."

Y: "He is in control and knows the plans He has for me."

Z: "I know that God is faithful – He keeps His word."

Post-test Answers:

A: "I keep my eyes on the prize for a better tomorrow."

B: "Mark 2:17" [*Jesus: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*"]

C: "I have to review His promises over & over & over & over – speak His truth to myself."

D: "That he's a constant God. That he's never going to abandon me like people have in my past. That I can always count on my God."

E: "I know I can count on God to always be with me, to protect me, love me, guide me, etc., etc."

F: "God loves me and will help me through any and all troubles if I seek out Him in prayer."

G: "because I know with God all things truly are possible"

H: "This is short, the rest is long."

I: "Because I know God is for me not against me. He makes good out of every bad [situation?]."

J: "I know he is always there for me and will bring me through my trials and tribulations."

K: "knowing he is with me"

15. How do you know or feel that God is active in your life and your world?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "My blessings and continuous learning about his word and life for me."

B: "I change and mature (internally) but I struggle in faith."

C: "He is because He said so and doesn't lie."

D: "All that He has told me, either directly or through one of His people is unfolding in my life."

E: "because He blesses me by other people and speaks to me through others and in devotionals, magazine articles, etc."

F: "I'm here that's proof enough."

G: "because I am prospering and my life is getting better"

H: "He's handling my case. He has me in his hand. No one can snatch me out or be against me."

I: "Because I sense His presence and see His breakthroughs and am reminded of His promises"

J: "He is always there when I need Him. By helping me get through all of my trials and tribulations."

K: "I feel the Holy Spirit, and having Joy today, no sadness"

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "My brother passed away. It was by the grace of God that he took him [*home*?]."

M: "I've seen him in strangers, at court during my trials. he gives us the benefit of the doubt."

N: "The feeling of FREEDOM and PEACE he gives me. The blessings like my graduation from [*name*], my job, my health, family, etc."

O: "I see a change in [*me*], regardless of what others see."

R: "Some days I'm not sure—especially when I hear the news!"

V: "Feel His presence when I pray, strength to get thru unbelievable times."

X: "Because I am here at [*place*]. I believe it is a part of his will for me to be here."

Z: "I see God answering prayer"

AA: "Because the Holy Spirit and God have blessed me, answering many of my prayers."

Post-test Answers:

A: "He has always provided for me physically and spiritually."

B: "I feel the Holy Spirit → conviction (why don't other believers?)
Certain circumstances or events."

C: "I know He is active in His world. Hard to see where He's active in my life—there's so very much more work to be done & not much time, tho I'm abundantly blessed."

D: "Looking back to see how far I have come. It's only by God's strength that I have been able to grow and keep moving forward."

E: "I stop breathing in my sleep and God gives me breath — that's how I know I can trust him."

F: "because I pray"

G: "many miracles already and knowing life is better"

H: "My cases are back open. I get the chance to go back and prove innocence."

I: "As I feel my daughter move in my womb, I know he is at work."

J: "He helps me to know right from wrong and his word teaches me as I read it daily."

K: "Because I change a lot. I love everyone, even when you talk about me."

16. How do God's grace, truth and forgiveness empower you to take action in your own situations?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Gives me strength and converts me to act."

B: "There is hope and forgiveness. God will protect."

C: "I need to make the effort, looking unto Jesus. I need to be reminded that these are some of His attributes and then get in sync with Him."

D: "I have to admit it gets hard to go through at times but I have just started acting on what He has promised."

E: "If God can forgive me and love me — take care of me, then who am I to not be like that with others."

F: "God teaches me to be forgiving"

G: "he gives me strength and lifts me up"

H: "I'm using my persistence to fix my case and life. With God's grace I'll be okay."

I: "It encourages me in the midst of hopeless situations because He is light."

J: "Gives me strength. Knowing I will get all of His love and help in everything I go through."

K: "God loves me all the time, that grace is the Greatest feeling, empowers me to work for the Lord"

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "forgiveness allows me to know that God is with me"

M: "'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' Philippians 4:13"

N: "Because no man without God would have believed in me to help me change and heal and GOD DID."

O: "It helps me to give grace, be truthful and work for forgiveness"

Q: "It doesn't, it empowers me to give the situation up to God to have him fight my battles."

R: "I turn things over to God and let him handle 'it'."

V: "God can give me the ability to forgive."

Z: "I know that God is for me, that He expects me to act with grace, truth, and forgiveness"

AA: "I have God in my heart, in all things, so I ask him before important decisions."

Post-test Answers:

A: "I ask for his strength and guidance to do his will."

B: "His love for me inspires me to love others."

C: "Grace—receiving what you don't deserve. God is my example."

D: "Because if God can forgive me, who am I not to forgive?"

E: "His grace gives me hope for a future that is filled with good for me and my family."

F: "Being strong in prayer and knowledge of the Lord"

G: "stand up for myself, strength, forgive and love"

H: "God has me. I have faith in Him."

I: "It helps me depend on Him and His goodness and have confidence I'm not alone and He will help."

J: "Helps me to want to do what God wants me to do, to live a righteous life."

K: “His grace is a gift, I'm empowered to do God’s work only because is love, wisdom, and blessing”

17. When you were a child, what did you learn about “loving and forgiving when life hurts” from your parents or others?

Pre-test Answers:

A: “not much”

B: “Not to repent. To forget but not necessarily forgive.”

C: “Nothing”

D: “I grew up in church but went through abuse so I learned to hide the truth so that everyone thinks things are perfect.”

E: “that holding a grudge gets you nowhere; they forgave readily people who hurt them”

F: “my parents were very loving and would also punish [*eagerly*?]”

G: “I didn't”

H: “We'd get beat or whatever but then 5 minutes later it's over so just forgive and move on.”

I: “forgiveness is the key to joy and [*health*?]”

J: “I knew there was a Jesus who loved me.”

K: “That will happen in life. But you have to forgive, because God did.”

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: “did not learn to forgive the abusive childhood until I grew up & realized they did what they knew”

M: “no matter how badly I behaved my parents still loved me.”

N: “I DIDN’T”

O: “Always say ‘I apologize’, ‘I love you,’ ‘I forgive you’”

P: “nothing”

R: “nothing”

S: “You do not have to like everyone, but you have to love them.”

U: “I think I learned that I had to submit in order to be forgiven.”

V: “When life hurts, shove it down & don’t let it get you down.”

W. [*no answer given*]

X: “not much”

Y: “I learned from my mom that forgiveness exhibits unconditional love and to be forgiven I must forgive.”

Z: “nothing”

AA: “Just that God loves me and he is real. Have faith.”

Post-test Answers:

A: “I don’t remember.”

B: “To move on, get over it. Not necessarily to forgive or process.”

C: “Nothing”

D: "As a child I didn't see forgiveness in a healthy way. Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to accept a person back into your life."

E: "to forgive and keep moving forward—you don't have to continue to let the person/people be in your life, but you do have to let go of the pain in order to move forward"

F: "from my parents"

G: "nothing"

H: "Forgive quickly, tomorrow you [*might*?] be gone. God forgives us."

I: [*no answer given*]

J: "I was taught to live a life of not hurting others and I was taught that Jesus loves me."

K: "To forget about and pray so God will make things better"

18. What does the word "forgiveness" mean to you?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "To forgive is confusing. Some people I can easily forgive. Some I do not want to interact with because of the drama."

B: "Trusting God to handle the situation/person."

C: "washed clean—miraculous"

D: "Choosing not to take [*accounts/offense* ?] for what someone has done its so hard not to especially when you're 'right.'"

E: "to let go of the negative action against me and move forward with or without the person in my life"

F: "when you forgive someone who hurts you or you need someone to forgive you"

G: "to let go and move on"

H: "Don't hold grudges or anger. Just move past it. If you hold anger you make yourself sick."

I: "To release the captive from my judgment and to be released from God's judgment. [*unable to read*]"

J: "If you forgive others then God will forgive you of your sins."

K: "To be humble in heart and really mean it."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "To forgive others a weight lifts off me. Forgiveness is for me."

M: "2nd chance"

N: "Freedom, peace, Jesus"

O: "totally letting go of an offence"

P: "acceptance and moving on"

S: "not letting the past affect your future, and learning from those experiences"

U: "Letting go of the hurt and focusing on love and acceptance"

V: "The weight of the world off my shoulders, back into a relationship with God"

W: "Discounting wrongs and moving forward in <u>love</u> & <u>faith</u>."

Y: "It means that there is nothing blocking the heart or relationship. Love."

Z: "It means 'Freedom' in my own heart."

AA: "Means to accept my wrongs and the wrongs of others."

Post-test Answers:

A: "Soften your heart to others even if it is painful based on the relationship."

B: "For giveness: to give of yourself, to give up for yourself"

C: [*no answer given*]

D: "Forgiveness is a process, it's our own healing journey."

E: "to accept what occurred, acknowledge the hurt/pain, do not hold it against the person/people—love them not despise them—wish them well"

F: "letting go"

G: "letting go of all burdens for good"

H: "It's a make or break characteristic. Forgive easily but remember and protect yourself too."

I: "to let go of an offense but not to the point of letting yourself be hurt"

J: "I have to tell other people who do harm to me that I forgive them for what they've done and move forward and sometimes it helps to pray for them."

K: "to no longer be angry"

19. How would you briefly explain the difference between forgiving someone and excusing someone?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "Forgiving goes deeper"

B: "Forgiving: Let go and let God, constructive criticism.
Excusing: Hold on and hold against."

C: "God does hold us accountable, but also says go and sin no more.
He doesn't excuse. He forgives."

D: "Forgiving is choosing to love despite damage someone has done
and excusing is looking past the damage, making excuses and pretending."

E: "forgiving means you don't hold it against person"

F: [*no answer given*]

G: "forgive is to set free, excuse is for the moment"

H: "I'm Queen of excuses for someone else. I will say they didn't mean it because of this or that. Just forgive it and it's OK."

I: "Excusing is letting them off the hook. Forgiveness is releasing from your judgment."

J: "Forgiving is telling someone you are sorry and accepting them asking you to forgive them. Excusing is not accepting forgiveness."

K: "Forgiving you if you stole from me. Excusing you if you cuss at me."

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: "Forgiveness for me means I forget what happened & move on."

M: "Forgiving someone is loving them but having boundaries. Excusing someone is giving them another chance to do you wrong."

N: "Excusing is basically letting someone get away with the issue."

O: "#1 is to let go and #2 is to overlook the offence/offender"

S: "Excusing means that you never learn from the past, so you achieve the same result every time."

V: "Excusing them doesn't confront them, doesn't deal with it. Forgiving someone—I hold no bitterness."

W: "We forgive with our hearts and excuse with our head."

X: "Forgiving someone comes from the heart. Excusing them is just letting them pass."

Y: "Forgiving is loving. Excusing is not dealing with the emotions that are negative, enabling."

Z: "Forgiving is to truly 'cancel the debt we think we're owed.' Excusing I think of as brushing it off rather than dealing with the issue."

AA: "I'm not sure"

Post-test Answers:

A: "Excusing is limited to a specific situation. Forgiving includes all perceived transgression."

B: "Hebrews 10:24-25" [*let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*.]

C: [*no answer given*]

D: "To excuse means to lessen the blame.
Forgive is to come to terms w/ the offense on your own. It doesn't lessen the offense though."

E: "excusing is like validating the hurt as being acceptable—it is not acceptable
and forgiving cancels out the offense as the debt being paid"

F: "forgiveness comes from God, excusing is only temporary"

G: "forgiving is letting go, excusing is still holding on"

H: "I excuse people's behavior all the time, but to forgive, [just?] move on."

I: "Forgiving is letting go but guarding against [*unable to read*].
Excusing is letting go and opening up for trouble again."

J: "Forgiving someone you go to them and tell them you forgive them.
If you just excuse someone it's overlooking it."

K: "They are both almost the same. You won't be angry when you forgive,
and to excuse is like someone bumps into you, you excuse them."

20. What is your greatest challenge in healing relationships after trouble or a conflict?

Pre-test Answers:

A: "fear of rejection"

B: "Getting rid of hurt, broken heart."

C: "How best to respond."

D: "Trust. I learned at a very young age that the world is [harsh?] and my trust was broken many times throughout my life so it's hard because I'm guarded especially in trusting."

E: "to stop thinking about the conflict/problem"

F: "I don't forgive easily"

G: “staying away”

H: “I just take blame for everything to try to spare the relationship. Life's too short. But I think people need to relax more. People get so up in arms over little things. Life's too short.”

I: “learning to trust again”

J: “Knowing that God's love is in the middle of the relationship.”

K: “By Letting Go, and Let God.”

The following participants did not complete the class and take the post-test:

L: “Never have made closure with my husband who is now remarried. Would not want to be with him but it would be nice to be able to forgive him and mean it.”

M: “my pride, admitting I was the problem in the situation”

N: “Anger”

O: “If the offender continues being offensive, I will not revisit the situation, I walk completely away from them.”

Q: “Feeling again. I don’t get attached easily, so if someone is close enough to hurt me, I turn off all emotions for them, I excuse it and not forgive. And in turn, it’s hard to feel things for them again.”

R: “not replaying the event over and over”

S: “Forgiving both those people and God for the pain and the loneliness that I had to endure.”

T: “not letting previous conflicts affect me still”

U: “Trying to bite my tongue … maybe to the point of not saying things that need to be said in order for true healing.”

V: “coming to terms with the hurt”

W: “trust”

Y: “confrontation of the issue”

Z: “Reconciliation does not always follow my choice to forgive. Sometimes we must forgive and let go.”

AA: “not judging or criticizing”

Post-test Answers:

A: “healing my heart”

B: “I often feel convicted and act on that but I’m usually very disappointed with the other (usually much older person) involved as it relates to their conviction or lack thereof.”

D: “Creating healthy boundaries.”

E: “Facing the pain I caused without excuses, not letting my guilty conscience beat me up for being the source of hurt. Trust is the biggest hurdle when someone hurts me."

F: “forgiveness of others and forgiveness of myself”

G: “guilt, trust”

H: “Talking to them. Knowing if they are really there for me or not.”

I: “building trust”

J: “going to them sometimes it's hard, but I know I have to forgive them and love them as Christ loves me. So God will forgive me also.”

K: “Pray, and worship God word. Keeping my joy in God”

APPENDIX F

TAIZÉ COMMUNITY COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

https://www.taize.fr/en_article114.html "Copyright Information," accessed 4/26/2021

Website

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Permission for use of the songs of Taizé

For years now, parishes and Churches have been using the "songs of Taizé" and have included some of them in their worship books. The brothers of the Community are happy about this because it creates links between what the young people experience in Taizé and the life of the Churches.
It is important to sing the songs with the same simplicity as in Taizé, so that groups and parishes can discover both the song itself and the prayer it expresses.
There is a profound relation between the musical phrase and these few words that are sung "to infinity". This long repetition of the same song is linked to a very ancient way of praying, including, for example, the Ave Maria in the West and the Jesus Prayer in the Eastern Churches. This is specifically what the Community wishes to preserve.
Formulated in many different ways, the numerous requests for permission to reproduce the songs have led the brothers to consider in some depth as to how the songs can best retain their true character and their reference to the commitment of the Community, with which they are associated.
The final version of each song is published only at the end of a long period of work by the composers and the authors, relying on the experience of the prayer at Taizé. Through this, each song has its unity and its style. This joint effort is closely linked to the Community's ministry among the young and the ongoing search for a form of prayer that is accessible to a large number of people in the meetings, both at Taizé and elsewhere.
Some people ask the Community to accept modifications: adaptations, arrangements, new instrumental accompaniments, new words or new translations. However justified these changes may be in the eyes of their authors, if they were accepted, we would soon see the emergence of multiple versions of most of the songs, some of them pretty far from the original. This is exactly what the Community wishes to avoid. It seems essential to let the Taizé songs live "as they are", in their simplicity and their original authenticity, as bearers of a prayer that is very simple and meditative.
These are the reasons why the Community authorises only the reproduction of the original versions of the songs, as they appear in the books published by Taizé, or by the authorised publishers in each country.

Singing

If you wish simply to sing the songs in public or private worship, no permission is needed.

Making recordings

If you wish to make a recording of the songs or to copy parts of existing recordings made at Taizé, please first contact A&PT.

Copying songs on paper

If you wish to copy or print the songs on paper or reproduce them on the internet, permission is needed. For non-commercial reproductions of the songs on paper – songsheets for the use of particular congregations, parishes, schools, choirs, or reproductions of individual pieces in liturgical song books for local use only – or for overhead projection, please ask for permission beforehand in the various countries as listed below, or otherwise contact A&PT directly.
For all other projects for reproduction or use of the songs – commercial or otherwise – it is important to contact A&PT.
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APPENDIX G

FIVE BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS TO LOVING OUR ENEMIES

The following information from Chapter Two was distributed as a handout booklet, "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies."

Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies

Christians may have idealistic intentions to love their enemies until they are violently attacked. Then what? For every person like Daniel who was rescued by God from the lions' den (Daniel 6), there were others like the apostles Peter and Paul who were killed by the enemies to whom they were witnessing. Jesus teaches his followers five boundaries and limits for ministering to enemies with God's grace and truth.

1. Be in God's Will
2. Be Confident in God's Truth
3. Be Willing to Set and Enforce Clear Boundaries
4. Be Willing to Wait
5. Be Able to Walk Away

1. Be in God's Will

First, Jesus only did what God sent him to do, so he was never operating outside of God's protection: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing'" (John 5:19a).[1] He knew he had God's approval and backing, so Jesus was not afraid to carry out his ministry regardless of persecution. Jesus followed God's agenda instead of reacting and adjusting to the demands of his enemies. He began each day in prayer with God. He trusted God to fulfill the plan they prayed about together as both of them did their part.

Jesus also did not allow his disciples to turn him away from God's agenda. When Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die and on the third day be raised, Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matthew 16:23). When his disciples tried to change his plans, Jesus chose to remain in the center of God's will.

Furthermore, Jesus did not let his own fears turn him away from God's will. When he was tempted to be overwhelmed by fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). He had such a close relationship with God that he was able to be faithful and steadfast in following God alone. His love for his Father was greater than his fear.

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1. All scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

2. Be Confident in God's Truth

Second, Jesus sometimes overcame his enemies with truth, and they gave up fighting and walked away. Jesus was not afraid to speak truth to power. When the scribes and Pharisees brought an adulteress to Jesus to test his judgment, he overcame them with truth. He said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her," and "they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones" (John 8:7, 9). Another time the Pharisees asked him a question to test him, and he again overcame his enemies with truth. "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (Matthew 22:46).

We too can confidently speak the truth in love and then trust God for the results. As Jesus advised his disciples, "When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20). Keener says that "God will empower the disciples by the Holy Spirit of prophecy."[2] When we are under attack, we can trust God and be confident in God's truth.

3. Be Willing to Set and Enforce Clear Boundaries

Third, Jesus set and enforced clear boundaries in his relationships with those who opposed and persecuted him. He did not give in or let them push him into imitating their sinful behavior. As Dan Allender explains: "In order to stop evil in its tracks, parameters must be set in the moment of transgression. A parameter (or boundary) is any line in human relations that honors separateness and respects individual dignity."[3] Jesus said "no" when people tried to cross his boundaries, as when they were about to come and take him by force to make him king (John 6:15). He said "no" to Peter when Peter wanted to know the future plans Jesus had for John (John 21:21-22).

Even when he was being tortured and crucified, Jesus kept his own dignity and honored the dignity of others. Pilate demanded answers, saying "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus kept his own dignity and answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." (John 19:10-11) As Allender writes, "We need to catch evil in the act and smile, calmly and confidently stating what we are willing and unwilling to endure—then watch hell rise out of the fury and explode."[4] Pilate delivered Jesus over to be crucified.

Allender says: "Our refusal to accept potential abandonment blocks most of us from setting limits and establishing consequences. But when we find the courage to do so, we will find love to be a powerful weapon against the forces of darkness."[5] Seeing the courage and dignity of Jesus on the cross, the Roman centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Jesus also honored the individual dignity of the penitent thief beside him on the cross; he looked on his soul and said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus honored his own boundaries, God's boundaries, and the individual boundaries of others.

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2. Keener, *Matthew*, 207.

3. Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman, *Bold Love*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1992), 245.

4. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 246.

5. Allender and Longman, *Bold Love*, 247.

Following his example, the disciples confidently set boundaries. The high priest had them arrested for witnessing to Jesus in the temple, saying "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:27-29 ESV). The apostles were threatened with shame, hatred, and punishment, but they honored God's boundaries. They followed God rather than men.

4. Be Willing to Wait

Fourth, when someone we love rejects us and leaves, sometimes we have to wait until he or she is ready to come back. When the prodigal son demanded his inheritance, left home, and squandered his money, his father allowed him to learn from his own mistakes. Although the father loved his son, he did not go after him and rescue him from his hunger and misery. The father waited until his son fully understood the consequences of his poor choices, repented, and made the choice in his own heart to change his ways and return to his father.

The prodigal son came to know his father's compassion in a new way when he returned:

> But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20b-24)

Nolland says, "The return to the father is yet more important than the confession of sin, since this opens up the possibility of the father's welcome; what is more, the father's welcome precedes the confession, and even qualifies it."[6] According to Marshall, "The language certainly suggests that the son had announced his intention never to return, and that therefore he was as good as dead. His unexpected return leads to great rejoicing."[7] Knowing when to wait and when to intervene for a loved one takes prayer and discernment. There is "a time to seek, and a time to lose" (Ecclesiastes 3:6). Seeking too soon may keep a prodigal from gaining maturity on his or her own. On the other hand, there is a time to urgently seek for a lost sheep in danger. When Christians pray to discern God's leading, he helps us know how to wait until the right time.

5. Be Able to Walk Away

Fifth, sometimes when people attacked Jesus, he simply walked away from them. When the angry mob in his hometown attempted to throw him over a cliff, "passing through their midst, he went away" (Luke 4:29). Marshall points out that "his hour had not yet come."[8] When another angry mob picked up stones to stone him, "he escaped from their hands" and "went away again across the Jordan" (John 10:22-40). If we will pray and listen, God is able to tell us when it is best to walk away.

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6. Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 784.

7. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 611.

8. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 190.

In the same Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44), he also set limits by saying, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you" (Matthew 7:6). Keener says, "Correcting those who will not receive correction is futile (vv. 1-5; Prov 9:8; 23:9); we should discerningly continue to offer wisdom (or the gift of the kingdom) only to those willing to receive what we offer, just as God does (Matthew 7:7-11)."[9] God does not ask us to force people to listen who are not ready to listen.

When Jesus sent his disciples out to witness, he told them to move on if they were not welcomed: "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town" (Matthew 10:14). If we ask for wisdom, God may guide us to walk away and pray for our enemies instead of answering their objections.

St. Augustine's mother Monica took this approach with her violent husband Patricius. Augustine explained in his *Confessions* that when Patricius was in a rage, she withdrew until he had calmed down:

> Though [Patricius] was remarkably kind, he had a hot temper, but my mother knew better than to say or do anything to resist him when he was angry. If his anger was unreasonable, she used to wait until he was calm and composed and then took the opportunity of explaining what she had done. Many women, whose faces were disfigured by blows from husbands far sweeter-tempered than her own, . . . knew well enough how hot-tempered a husband my mother had to cope with. They used to remark how surprising it was that they had never heard, or seen any marks to show, that Patricius had beaten his wife or that there had been any domestic disagreement between them, even for one day. When they asked her, as friends, to tell them the reason, she used to explain the rule which I have mentioned. Those who accepted it found it a good one: the others continued to suffer humiliation and cruelty.[10]

Monica's example of patience and gentleness made a deep impression on her son Augustine and also on her husband. Augustine praised her in his Confessions:

> In the end she won her husband for you [God] as a convert in the very last days of his life on earth. After his conversion she no longer had to grieve over those faults which had tried her patience before he was a Christian. She was also the servant of your servants. Those of them who knew her praised you, honoured you, and loved you in her, for they could feel your presence in her heart and her holy conversation gave rich proof of it.[11]

Monica was willing to walk away, pray, and wait patiently until her husband was ready to listen, and her husband accepted Christ.

Paul and Timothy also knew how to listen after God forbade them to preach in Asia: "And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:6-7). Because Paul and Timothy followed God's leading, they were willing to give up their own plans, walk away, and let God send them to a more fruitful mission.

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9. Keener, *Matthew*, 159.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 195.

11. Augustine, *Confessions,* 196.

Summary

Following the example and teachings of Jesus, the disciples loved their enemies within God's boundaries and limits. They devoted themselves to prayer in order to be in God's will. They boldly and confidently preached God's grace and truth. They set and enforced clear boundaries when people opposed or persecuted them. They were willing to wait for God's timing. They were able to walk away when God closed the door to ministry in some places. They listened and let God direct them where to go and whom to address. They learned how to minister in response to God's leading.

The Hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

God's desire for our enemies is to reconcile our relationships and change all our lives for the better. Jesus demonstrated this power when he met Zacchaeus and went to his home even though people grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). The critics thought of Zacchaeus as the hated chief tax collector, a corrupt rich man who would never follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. As Marshall notes, "To stay in such a person's home was tantamount to sharing in his sin."[12] Nolland says "The practice of social ostracism as a means of deterrence" was not followed by Jesus, who "practices a far more creative alternative" by loving his enemy.[13] Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus and gave him a chance to change his heart.

Zacchaeus responded to the grace and truth in Jesus Christ. He said, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Nolland points out that this "radical disposal of wealth for the benefit of the poor," far beyond any Jewish legal requirement, "appears to more than compensate for any of his misdeeds."[14] Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house…for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9-10). Like a good shepherd, Jesus rescued his lost sheep.

As Nolland points out, "Contact with Jesus has transformed Zacchaeus. Despite his manner of life up to this point, Zacchaeus is not to be disenfranchised from the People of God."[15] Instead of rejecting Zacchaeus, Jesus saves him. Even our worst enemies can be reconciled when the Lord touches their hearts and brings them to salvation. Instead of destroying Zaccheus as a worldly leader might do, Jesus redeemed his life and changed his greed into generosity for the poor.

Jesus also redeemed Saul on the road to Damascus and gave him a new name: Paul. Jesus changed him from a man "breathing threats and murder" against the church into "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:1,15). The Lord was able to reconcile Paul with the church, to use Paul's gifts to serve the church, and to bring about good instead of evil for all the nations of the world.

God's holy power to save and reconcile gives us hope as we follow Christ's example in loving our enemies. Our holy Father in heaven seeks out his lost children *before we deserve it* and then seeks to bring us home to be reconciled. Christians can also seek out God's lost children *while they are still sinning*, especially our enemies, and offer to be a channel of holy grace and truth to them. We, too, can

12. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 697.

13. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 905.

14. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 905, 906.

15. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 906.

love people who do not deserve it in hope that they will repent, receive the joy of the Lord, and be saved as we were. Like Jesus, we can be the first to extend love as "he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We can desire to bring glory to God and joy to the Father's heart by seeking out lost sheep and reflecting God's light to help them find their way home.

The first twelve apostles could never have imagined how the Gospel message would spread throughout the whole world. God may also work through us today to accomplish far more than we might ask or think.

~ August 7, 2020, Barbara Gail Simons

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End of handout booklet, "Five Boundaries and Limits to Loving Our Enemies."

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